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"'You can't sleep on nothing, and have your meals on the floor.'" (Page 60.)

[*Frontispiece*

A Man with Nine Lives]

A MAN WITH NINE LIVES

632

BY

RICHARD MARSH

Author of "The Beetle," "A Royal Indiscretion," "Justice Suspended," etc.

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A MAN WITH NINE LIVES

CHAPTER I.

SOLE RESIDUARY LEGATEE.

"HAVE you ever heard how I first made the acquaintance of Mr. Jerningham Creed?"

The lawyer shook his head. A smile wrinkled his lips, as if for some reason he found the earnestness with which Mr. Adair put the question amusing.

"It's a queer story—then the whole thing has been a queer story—and it seems as if the queerest part of it was still to come."

Adair had got up from his seat and was wandering about the room. Now, suddenly returning to the table, he leaned over it towards the lawyer.

"When I first met Creed, I was starving—perhaps you find that amusing. You seem to have your own ideas of amusement."

Mr. Foster smiled again, tapping the table with the edge of a sheaf of blue papers.

"The truth is, Mr. Adair, that in a sort of general sense I find the whole thing amusing. Surely you

and Creed were never made for each other. The whole thing seems incongruous; I can't see you associated—especially with this at the end of it."

With his blue papers he directed the other's attention to a sheet of parchment which lay open in front of him. Adair eyed the speaker in silence; then continued:

"It was past one o'clock on a February night, or rather morning. I had hung about the Strand till after closing-time, hoping that fortune might send me—well, I'll say a crust of bread. It didn't; so after the public-houses had closed, and the street was cleared, I went down to the Embankment. It wasn't nice weather; there was a pretty cool wind, and I was in a state which made it seem cooler; rain had been falling, and a mist was rising from the river—cheerful climatic conditions for a man who proposed to get a little sleep on a seat by the water. I daresay it was because I was so hungry that I felt as though I were chilled to the bone. I marched along the pavement, slapping myself with my arms, trying to get some of the ice out of my body. As I was nearing Waterloo Bridge, I had a little adventure. I had noticed an elderly man in front of me, walking alone. Suddenly there came towards him from across the road three individuals. One went for him from behind, another from the front, the third began to put his hands all over him."

"They were robbing him, you mean?"

"It looked uncommonly like it. It was no business of mine. And when a man gets where I had, principles of abstract morality don't worry him. But an idea occurred to me: if I tackled those three gentlemen, the exercise might make me warm.

So I went for them hammer and tongs, and they—after two or three lively moments they took to their heels, without giving me quite so much exercise as I had been inclined to hope they would."

The lawyer interposed with an inquiry.

"How tall are you? You seem to me to be a sort of understudy for a giant—which makes it so odd that you should have occupied the position you did."

"I'm rather under six-foot-two, and I suppose that February morning I was trained about as fine as I could be. Neither of those three gentlemen could use their fists, and exercise of that kind wasn't to their liking. I was left alone with the old gentleman. Perhaps it was because they had not left him in a very cheerful condition that he seemed not over disposed to be civil. 'Are you another of the robbers?' were the first words he addressed to me. I explained to him that I wasn't. He looked me up and down as well as he could, and then remarked: 'If you will see me home I'll give you twopence.' It was a generous offer, with which I closed. I escorted him to his chambers in Mitre Court. He had another good look at me as he handed me the twopence at the street door, and he said: 'My name is Jerningham Creed. I'm on the second floor; you'll see my name on the board. If you'll come to see me at half-past nine o'clock I may have something to say to you.' I went at half-past nine, and he offered me the position of clerk."

"That must have been a rather curious interview; I should like to have seen it."

"It was rather by way of a curiosity, the first interview I had with Mr. Jerningham Creed. When

I got into the room he looked at me all round and all over as if I were some oddity he had paid money to see. Then he remarked, 'You're a gentleman,' and presently added, 'without five shillings worth of clothing.' I told him that I trusted his second statement was incorrect. I hoped that if I offered my wardrobe for sale I should get more for it than five shillings, since what I was wearing represented everything I had in the world. Then he asked me questions. I answered some of them, some of them I told him were no business of his. Just as I expected that he was going to ask me to take myself off, and perhaps give me sixpence, he observed, 'I'll make you my clerk, and I'll pay you thirty shillings a week. You can begin this morning. I'll give you a note to a man I know who sells second-hand clothing; he'll give you some better clothes than those you have on, and I'll deduct the price of them from your salary.' Before I had quite realised the situation I was calling on the man he knew."

"You don't mean to say that he was able to fit you out of stock?"

"He wasn't—that was the trouble. He had garments which he said had been made for a gentleman who was all of six foot; but I fancy that must have been a short six foot, because they were inclined to be sketches on me. However, as Mr. Creed's clerk, I lived in those garments for three months, and flourished exceedingly."

"What sort of work did you do? His must have been such—shall I say funny, work."

"Foster, I writhe when I think of it. When I realised what his trade was I was disposed to do

what those three individuals had done under the shadow of Waterloo Bridge—cut and run."

"I don't think I'm libelling my late client when I say that I always understood he was a usurer of the worst type."

"You are not; you understood quite correctly. He lent lodging-house keepers ten pounds on a hundred pounds' worth of furniture, and charged two guineas for expenses; young gentlemen twenty-five pounds on a bill for a hundred at three months, having first got them to sign an affidavit that they had never borrowed money before and were over twenty-one. He was a cute devil—he'd take very queer risks. A writing man, who had been fool enough to lose a lot of money at baccarat, got him to lend him five hundred pounds on certain terms on the security of a play which was shortly to be produced in town—he netted five thousand pounds for that five hundred before the run of that play was done; I believe he was drawing royalties on it to the day he died."

"I know some stories about Mr. Creed—everybody does. What I wonder is, what sort of work you did for him."

"Don't talk of it. He had me under his thumb, like everyone else with whom he had dealings. He debited me with five pounds for those clothes he bought, and I never succeeded in working it off—that's a fact. In some mysterious way the debt kept increasing. I could give you some figures which would certainly provide you with amusement. I worked for Jerningham Creed nearly two years. When he paid me my last week's salary I signed an entry in a little book he kept which showed that

I owed him seven pounds eighteen and sixpence. He was a wonderful man."

"I take it that you're not a very good man of business, Mr. Adair."

"I'm not: I have no pretensions of the kind. Creed used to say that that was one of my attractions in his eyes; but if I'd been an excellent man of business I doubt if it would have made any difference in my dealings with him. The thing was not to deal with him—there alone safety lay. You may imagine that I had some very strong feelings on the subject of Mr. Jerningham Creed, and there were occasions on which I couldn't help letting him know it. He didn't mind—not a rap. He'd merely remark that he was my benefactor as well as employer, and that he was sure I should never leave him while I was still owing money to the man who had picked me out of the gutter. That was true; he had picked me out of the gutter; so—I didn't leave him."

"I imagine, Mr. Adair, that yours must be rather an interesting story? I imagine you never set out in life with the idea of becoming a money-lender's clerk?"

"I did not; but I got there all the same; and if I hadn't, goodness only knows where I should have got."

"Do you mind my speaking frankly to you, Mr. Adair?"

The lawyer was turning his papers over as if not particularly anxious, for the moment, to meet the other's glance.

"Not at all; you'll not be the first man who's done that, Foster."

"You say you didn't know what was in this will of his?"

"I have said so; if you like, I will say so again. I'd no more idea than you had—you say you had none at all."

"I was not, in the ordinary course, Mr. Creed's legal adviser, as you know, Mr. Adair. His business was done by solicitors who do that kind of business. But one day he brought me this box." The lawyer touched a despatch-box which stood on his table. "It was locked and sealed. He told me to keep it till he fetched it away again, or till he died. In the latter event I was to open it within twenty-four hours of the news of his decease having reached me, and act upon the instructions it contained. In it, as you are aware, I found his will, and what purported to be a schedule of his possessions, drawn up, as he explains, to avoid an unnecessary bill of costs when declaring the estate for probate. By this will —which is in his own handwriting, and was drawn up less than three months ago—it was signed and completed two days before he brought the despatch-box to me—he leaves everything to you unconditionally. Have you any idea why he should have done so?"

"No more than you have, Mr. Foster. He certainly never showed himself too well disposed towards me."

"It's odd, under those circumstances, that he should have left everything to you. Can you conceive of any special reason why he should have done so? Had he an intimate acquaintance with your private history?"

"So far as I know, he had not. After that first

morning he asked me no questions; I should not have answered them if he had. My private history is—private."

"I take it that your name is Adair?"

There was perhaps a momentary hesitation before the other answered.

"You may, Mr. Foster: my name is Adair—Martin Adair." The lawyer's eyes were now raised, and were observing the speaker keenly. "The most argus-like glance cannot alter facts, Mr. Foster."

"You would have noticed, Mr. Adair, that the wording of the will is rather odd. It was not drawn up by a lawyer, though a sound enough legal document. The testator says that he leaves everything to the person known to him as Martin Adair—as if he had reason to doubt that your name was Adair."

"I did notice that — I am not altogether unobservant."

"So you see, whether your name is or is not Adair makes no difference—you still inherit."

"Exactly. That is what I gathered."

"Another odd point is that when Mr. Creed brought this box to me he hinted that within three months he'd either fetch it back again or—be dead."

"That almost suggests that he must have had the prophetic eye."

"But he can hardly have anticipated that inside three months he would be murdered."

"Have you anything to show that? He might have had private reasons of his own on which such an anticipation might have been based."

"What makes it still more curious is — the instructions which the box contained. In this paper which I have in my hand he tells me that

in case of its being necessary to hold a coroner's inquest on his body, the package containing his will is not to be opened till the coroner has given his verdict. Now, there again is something which suggests that he hardly expected to die in the ordinary course of nature."

Adair walked across the room and back again before he answered. His restlessness throughout the interview was marked; he seemed unable to keep still. As he moved to and fro, his ill-fitting clothes—too small in all directions for a man of his inches—made of him a figure which was both sinister and grotesque.

"Mr. Foster, I don't see to what your questions are pointing. Jerningham Creed was a money-lender of the most nefarious type. He had dealings in all directions, with sums of all magnitudes. Such a man was sure to have enemies; beyond a doubt he was aware of this. Is it not conceivable that he had reason to believe that he was going in almost daily fear of his life?"

"From whom? Did you ever hear him threatened? Were you cognisant of any threat of violence having reached him?"

"Not I; and that's what I'm driving at. Are you hinting, in even the remotest way, that I had anything to do with the death of Mr. Jerningham Creed?"

"I am not. But I cannot help thinking that you suspect some one who had. In view of the fact that he has made of you a rich man, I put it to you if you are of opinion that it is—we will say wise—to keep your ideas upon the subject to yourself?"

Adair came up to the table when the lawyer ceased

speaking. The two men looked each other steadily in the eyes. Then Adair seated himself on the side of the table, and laughed—he alone knew what at—and presently said:

"Foster, you and I are going to be friends. Now that I'm a rich man I can afford a friend like you—and I shall want one. I have all sorts of schemes in my head in which a lawyer who is at the same time honest and smart will be absolutely indispensable, if those schemes are to be carried to a successful conclusion. One of these days I may want to talk to you about all sorts of things; at present I don't. That is the final answer to everything you have in your mind—so change the subject, please. I hear that the old firm is still being carried on—by Messrs. Issachar and Daniel."

Getting off the table, Adair smiled at the man on the other side of it. The lawyer smiled back at him.

"So I understand. They did a good deal of Mr. Creed's business, didn't they?"

"They did—all the dirtiest part of it. A nice pair they are! I'm told they are proposing, in the absence of any will, to carry on the business in the interests of—I don't quite know who." Adair was walking about the room again. "Foster, I'm going round to Mitre Court. I'm going to pay them a visit and explain how matters stand. Would you mind coming with me? I'm proposing to treat Messrs. Issachar and Daniel to a little surprise."

CHAPTER II.

SWEEPING THEM OUT.

THE chambers of the late Jerningham Creed were on the second floor of a building which stood badly in need of renovation; they were probably the most ill-kept apartments in that building. In the front room, which Mr. Creed had used as an office, two men were seated at a large, old-fashioned and shabby writing-table. In front of them stood an individual who held a dilapidated top hat in his hand—somehow his whole appearance was in sympathy with that top hat. One of the men at the table, small, lean, dark, with eyes and nose which seemed too large for his face, was addressing this individual in anything but friendly tones.

"It's no good, Hackman—pay, or do the other thing. We won't give you another day—not another hour. We're sick of your sort. The money by ten o'clock to-morrow morning, or every stick you've got in your house by twelve. Now off you go, that's enough of you!"

The shabby man endeavoured to expostulate.

"But, Mr. Issachar, I give you my word that if it hadn't been for a series of the most unexpected misfortunes——"

Mr. Issachar cut him short.

"Yes, I know—whisky and Hollands. Too much drink and too many horses. I won't listen to a word. Are you going?"

"But, Mr. Issachar, if you'll allow me to say just one word——"

Mr. Issachar struck a bell which was beside him. A burly man came out of another room.

"Potter, put this man into the street.'

Potter approached the shabby-looking individual, who put his hat on in evident haste.

"I'll go, Mr. Issachar, I'll go——"

"No, you won't, Mr. Hackman. If you please, you'll stay." Martin Adair came into the room. "You shouldn't leave your door open, Issachar: I've been listening on the landing. What are you doing in this room—and you, Mr. Daniel?"

The little Jew stared up at the newcomer.

"What are we doing? Of all the impudence! What are you doing, you—gentleman picked out of the gutter? You get out of this, quick! No nonsense, my man! Your services are no longer required. We prefer your room to your company. Why Mr. Creed ever stood you at all I can't make out. Take yourself off, or Potter shall attend to you."

"If I were you, Potter, I don't think I should try." Adair had come right into the room, and stood in front of the table at which the two men were seated. "Mr. Issachar, Mr. Daniel, this room, and all it contains, is mine. You are trespassers. As you were good enough to say to me, your services are not required. If I have to employ solicitors, they won't be your kind. You'll be held re-

sponsible for everything you've done since the death of Mr. Creed, and matters will at once be carefully gone into to see what you have done. At present, good morning."

Messrs. Issachar and Daniel looked at each other, as if doubting if the newcomer was serious. Presently Mr. Daniel asked:

"What game's this, Adair? What are you trying to play at?"

Mr. Daniel spoke with a strong Cockney accent and he squinted. Martin Adair looked down at him as at some puny thing.

"The game, Mr. Daniel, is that Mr. Jerningham Creed's will has been found."

Both men started; again they looked at each other.

"What are you giving us, Adair? What will' been found? Don't you try to come it over us— take a tip from me."

"Mr. Creed, Mr. Daniel and Mr. Issachar, mad a will which he deposited for safe keeping with Mr Edward Foster, a legal gentleman of the very highes repute, who has chambers in Gray's Inn Buildings I've just heard that will read. It's very simple— Mr. Creed has left me everything."

"I don't believe it." This was Mr. Issachar His partner added:

"We neither of us believe it. You tell it fo a tale! Why should he leave you so much as penny piece? I don't believe he did."

"Is that so, Mr. Issachar and Mr. Daniel? Her is Mr. Foster, he may be able to give you a littl assistance." As he spoke the gentleman referred t entered the room. "Mr. Foster, I don't know if yo

are acquainted with Mr. Issachar and Mr. Daniel; if you're not, I'm sure you don't want to be. I've just been informing them that Mr. Creed's will has been found, and that by it I'm sole residuary legatee—I believe that's the proper legal term. Would you mind informing these persons that that is the case?"

"That certainly is the case, Mr. Adair." The newcomer looked at the two men at the table. "Mr. Adair is quite accurate in what he says. Mr. Creed confided his will to my keeping; by it he leaves everything, unconditionally, to Mr. Martin Adair."

The two men broke out into a storm of questions, one tumbling over the other.

"When was this will made? Who drew it up? Why wasn't its existence notified to us before? Under what circumstances was it drawn up? Why should he have left, as you say he has, everything he had to a man whose acquaintance he made in the gutter, and who was only a sort of hanger-on in his office?. Are there no legacies, no mention of old friends, of business associates of long standing, who have rendered him inestimable services? Do you wish us to believe that he's left us nothing?"

Mr. Foster replied to all the questions at once.

"Your names are not mentioned. No name is mentioned except that of Mr. Martin Adair, to whom everything has been left unconditionally."

"I don't believe it!" Mr. Daniel was moved to wrath. "It's incredible! What was this chap to him compared to us? Why, we've done his business for more than twenty years. If it hadn't been for us he would have lost thousands and thousands. What has Mr. Adair ever done for him?"

Mr. Adair's reply to this question took the form of an instruction to Potter.

"Potter, put these two men down the stairs and into the street. Or, if you don't feel disposed to do so, I will. Issachar, come out of that chair." The speaker, moving round the table, took Mr. Issachar by the collar of his coat. Mr. Issachar showed signs of fight on lines of his own.

"Don't you lay a finger on me, my man, or I'll make you pay for it! Even supposing there is something in this cock and bull story of yours, you can't handle me as if I were so much furniture. There's our bill; we've been working here night and day ever since that old man was murdered. Everything would have gone to pot if it hadn't been for us; who's going to pay us for what we've done?"

"That's a question, Issachar, which will be considered later, and on which I have no doubt a good deal will be heard from you. At the present moment what you have to do is get! Mr. Foster, I call you to witness that I have informed these two gentlemen that they are trespassing on my premises, and that I wish them to cease that trespass. If they refuse, I believe I'm at liberty to remove them without using any more violence than is absolutely necessary."

"That is the case, Mr. Adair."

"Then, as that is the case, Mr. Issachar, allow me to lift you tenderly in my arms." Suiting the action to the word, the big man lifted the little one off his feet. The little man screamed.

"Where's my hat and my umbrella and my bag? I'm not going to leave them behind."

"You shan't. I hope it won't be necessary to remove you any farther than the landing, and that

you'll be able to take yourself downstairs. Rest easy, you shall have your belongings to keep you company."

Mr. Issachar, having been borne from the room, Adair, returning, beckoned to his partner.

"Now, Mr. Daniel, how is it to be—on your own feet or in my arms?"

Mr. Daniel crammed a felt hat down on to his head. With an umbrella in one hand and a black bag in the other, he began to move towards the door. As he went he gave utterance to his feelings.

"You shall hear of this, Mr. Adair. Don't you think you've got the best of us. I leave this room under protest, in fear of violence. I shouldn't wonder if you found this the most expensive little game you ever played. What do you want with me? Don't you lay your hand upon my shoulder." Adair had intercepted the speaker on his way to the door.

"What's in that bag, Mr. Daniel? You'll excuse my looking?"

"Don't you touch my bag. That's felony if you touch my bag. Mr. Foster, I call you to witness."

"Call your aunt and uncle to witness, Mr. Daniel. I'm going to see what's in that bag; we'll talk about felony afterwards."

Taking the bag out of the excited gentleman's hand, Adair, opening it, turned its contents out on to the table. A quantity of papers appeared.

"These papers will be examined, Mr. Daniel. I fancy that a good many of them are mine. If among them there should be any which are yours, they shall be returned to you. Now for Mr. Issachar's bag. This is his, I think, on the floor by

the table." Picking up another black bag, twin brother to the first, he turned out its contents. "More papers, most of them, I imagine, mine. The same remarks apply—those which are not mine shall be returned to Mr. Issachar. There, gentlemen, are your bags. One remark I have to make: Any papers you have in your keeping belonging to the estate of the late Mr. Jerningham Creed will be handed to me, or to my solicitor, Mr. Edward Foster here, within four-and-twenty hours, or the consequences will be on your own heads."

When Messrs. Issachar and Daniel had departed, which they did threatening all sorts of dire things, Mr. Adair turned his attention to the burly Potter, who had been witnessing the little scene which had just taken place with what seemed anything but an air of enjoyment.

"So your name's Potter. I don't remember to have seen you before. Where do you come from?"

"Messrs. Issachar and Daniel brought me, sir. I'm employed by them."

"If that is so, return to your own employers; you certainly are not employed by me."

Mr. Potter meekly went. Adair addressed the gentleman with the dilapidated top hat, whose bearing suggested that he was in a state of considerable incertitude.

"Your name, I believe, is Hackman—Ebenezer Hackman. You owed Mr. Creed money, which you have repeatedly promised to pay and haven't."

Mr. Hackman turned his hat round and round between his fingers as he delivered himself of a stammering reply.

"Mr. Creed lent me sixty pounds on a bill of sale

on my furniture for one hundred and fifty. I wasn't able to pay the principal on the day arranged, so I've had to keep on paying fines. I've paid him in fines altogether just on ninety pounds, and he's still got that bill of sale for a hundred and fifty. There's a fine of five pounds due to-day, and I do give you my word, sir, that I'll let you have it the day after to-morrow. And if things only begin to look up a little, I'll let you have the whole amount perhaps, next month. My wife's ill, and if you take the furniture, break up the home, I shouldn't wonder if it would be the death of her."

"I fancy, Mr. Hackman, I've heard you tell that story before. Your wife seems to be a chronic invalid, and you seem to have got a habit of promising to pay next month. Here's a receipt in full for the money you owed Mr. Creed; the bill of sale shall be looked up and returned to you when found. I've a notion, Mr. Hackman, that if you drank more water, and did less betting, you might be able to keep out of the hands of money-lenders. Good morning to you, sir. You needn't thank me. You know your way to the door."

Clearly Mr. Hackman did, because he went through it in a state of obvious mental bewilderment. When he was on the landing he looked at the slip of paper which Mr. Adair had passed him across the table.

"'Received from Ebenezer Hackman the sum of one hundred and fifty pounds in full settlement of any claims which the estate of the late Jerningham Creed may have against him. The bill of sale which Ebenezer Hackman gave to the late Jerningham Creed is hereby cancelled.—Martin Adair.'"

Mr. Hackman read this account half aloud, then gave a little gasp.

"Who's Martin Adair? I suppose he is. Well, if this don't beat anything. Now I shall be able to borrow a bit more. I'll put every farthing on Dandy Dinmont I can get—that horse ought to be worth a fortune to me."

Unconscious of Mr. Hackman's soliloquy without, Mr. Foster said to Martin Adair within:

"Is that the way in which you propose to carry on the business?"

"Yes, Foster, you've hit it; that is exactly the way."

CHAPTER III.

THE MAULER.

MR. FOSTER and Martin Adair had a long talk. They went through a great many papers together, then the lawyer departed. Adair, having seen him off the premises, said to himself:

"There's something at the back of Foster's mind."

The consciousness that he was left alone in Jerningham Creed's chambers seemed suddenly to strike him. He looked round the room.

"So this is all mine—how funny! I represent the most blackguardly money-lending business in London. That seems droll. This room wants doing up. It's full of atmosphere; the business which has been done in it has left its impress upon the walls and ceiling—they're filthy. I noticed it the first time Creed brought me in here. Somehow now I notice it more than ever. I wonder why."

Going to the table he turned over idly some of the papers which he and the lawyer had been examining.

"The man still lives in these, the whole place seems full of him. I have a queer sort of feeling that at any moment I may hear that croaking voice of his. He seems all the time to be at the back of me; I'm conscious of an inclination to look round

and see if he's there. It isn't wholesome; it's also ridiculous—absurd. He's really dead."

Adair, standing up straight, extended his arms, as if to stretch himself. The strain upon his garments caused by his attempt to do so turned his thoughts into another channel.

"I believe I've burst the sleeve of this coat, and I'm almost sure that something went behind. Since I'm a rich man, the first thing I must do is to buy myself clothes proper to my position, which will fit. I am rich."

He took from his coat pocket a wad of bank-notes.

"One hundred pounds, twenty-fives—an advance from my solicitor in proof that I am rich. I shall probably have to wait more than six months before I touch any of Jerningham Creed's money. In the meantime my solicitor will see that I am properly clad. That again seems funny. I can't help thinking that old Creed must have been a humorist. What's that?"

Turning suddenly on his heel he glanced behind him.

"I thought I heard somebody laughing. When a man's in a certain state what tricks his senses can play him! I could have sworn that somebody laughed. I suppose there's no one in that room?"

He crossed to the door, which was in the opposite corner.

"Empty—of course it's empty! Who imagined that is wasn't empty? This is the apartment in which I used to sit and work myself to the bone to earn thirty shillings a week, which Creed took particular care should never be paid in full. He was a remarkable man."

Martin Adair stood with the open door in his hand, looking from one room to the other with an odd expression on his face. He seemed to be in a contemplative mood.

"I wonder why he took me into his office. I felt at the time that it wasn't only gratitude for the little service I rendered him under the shadow of Waterloo Bridge which induced him to employ me. Then what other inducement could he have had, and why, in the name of all that's wonderful, did he leave me his money—me, of all things living? What was in his mind when he made that will? I should very much like to know. It's—it's like a judgment, the drollest thing of which I've heard."

Returning into the larger room he seemed to have developed a sudden restlessness; as if, as had been the case in Mr. Foster's office, he was unable to keep still.

"The atmosphere of this room worries me; it will get on my nerves if I stop here long. I've a preposterous notion that if I could only see him Creed's in it all the time. I must be a bit under the weather. A man who has just heard that a fortune has been left him oughtn't to feel like that."

Again spinning suddenly on his heels, he stared around him.

"Confound it! I could have sworn there was someone there. This is most unpleasant. I suppose there is no one about the place. Let me see, that door leads into Creed's private apartments. I presume it's open. I was never on the other side of it. There can't be anyone playing fool tricks on the other side of that door. If there is——!"

He left the sentence unfinished, crossing the room and opening the door to which he had alluded.

"What a musty smell. This place does want doing up. Fancy living in rooms which smell like these! How long is it since a window was opened? This, I take it, was his private sitting-room."

He was standing in a fair-sized apartment, which was rather overcrowded with substantial furniture. A big oak dining-table, a huge sideboard, heavy chairs. If the air of the room had been sweeter, and the place cleaner, it might not have been amiss. Everything was in confusion. A dirty tablecloth was at one end of the table, on which were the remnants of a meal. Having opened the windows, Adair took up a dish on which there was something not nice to look at.

"That's the remains of Creed's last supper. Fancy leaving it there all this time. What am I to do with it? I can't put it out of the window."

Something struck his ears. He listened.

"Hallo! That sounds like someone in the next room—someone of real flesh and blood. Who's there?"

He returned to the adjoining apartment to see. A woman was standing in the doorway which opened on to the landing.

"You must excuse my coming in, sir; but I knocked and no one answered."

"That's all right—I didn't hear you. Who are you, and what do you want?"

"Can I see Mr. Creed?"

"Mr Creed? I don't think you can."

He eyed her. She was a woman probably in the forties—careworn, anxious, a type he had seen

represented again and again in that room. His tone was unintentionally brusque; it seemed to awe her. She was apologetic.

"I'm very sorry to seem troublesome, but I should very much like to see Mr. Creed. I've come all the way from Spalding."

"Have you? You'll have to come from farther than that if you wish to see Mr. Creed, madam. The last time I saw him he was lying just in front of where you're standing, on the floor, in what the newspapers described as a regular pool of blood. He was dead—some kind friend had murdered him. I have only to shut my eyes to see him now."

The expression which was on the woman's face as she looked at him was curious. She evidently did not know what to make of his words, to be in doubt as to whether or not he was jesting. He answered the unspoken question which he saw in her eyes.

"Permit me, madam, to offer you a chair. In Spalding they seem to be a little behind the times. News must reach you slowly there. Perhaps you don't read the papers?"

"No, sir, I don't. Mother has the *Family Hearth*—that's the only paper we buy. Sometimes there is a newspaper in the house, but I don't look at it. There's never anything in it of interest to me. My time's too much occupied to bother about newspapers."

She spoke with a quiet earnestness which lent her an odd sort of dignity. Adair, who was standing close to the seat on which, at his invitation, she had placed herself, looked down at her with quizzical eyes.

"That explains it. May I ask to whom I am speaking?"

"My name is Bucknell—Mary Bucknell. I live at the Wish Farm, Great Beddows, near Spalding. I wrote to Mr. Creed, but as I had no answer, I thought I'd come and see him. I had to come and see him."

"If you'd been a reader of newspapers, Mrs. Bucknell——"

"Miss Bucknell—I'm unmarried. I live with my mother—she's Mrs. Bucknell."

"If you'd been a student of the daily journals, Miss Bucknell, for once in a way you'd have seen something in them which was of interest to you. You'd have seen that Mr. Creed was dead."

"Dead. Mr. Creed dead! How long has he been dead? What will happen to us?"

"That, I fancy, is a question a good many people are asking. The only interest they take in Mr. Creed's death is how it will affect them. You owe him money?"

"A great deal; I wish I didn't. When father died he left debts which had to be paid. We didn't know where to turn for the money. Mother saw an advertisement in the *Family Hearth*."

"Did Mr. Creed advertise in the *Family Hearth?* That's just the sort of paper which would commend itself to him as getting at the sort of public he wanted."

"It was just a little advertisement about a private gentleman wishing to lend money to ladies in distress. So I wrote, and he lent us five hundred pounds on the security of the farm."

"Is it your freehold?"

"It's belonged to the Bucknells for generations. We used the money to pay father's debts. We were

to pay it back in two years. Mr. Creed said we needn't worry if we couldn't. Things went wrong; mother was ill, and I was worried, and I forgot the day when the first instalment was due. Mr. Creed came down to see us."

"I presume you and he had a nice little interview?"

"Well, sir, he was not unkind. I told him how things were, and that I couldn't pay; he said it didn't matter, I needn't worry—all I need do was to sign a paper which he took out of his pocket, and he'd see that it was all right. So I signed it."

"Having first, I take it, read the paper."

"I didn't read it myself, but Mr. Creed explained. I'm afraid I didn't quite understand his explanation. Things didn't improve, and when another instalment was coming due I wrote and told him so. He came down again; four times he has been down altogether, and each time I've signed a paper."

"Have you, since the money was first lent, paid him nothing?"

"Mr. Creed always said it didn't matter. Then, about a month ago, there came a letter in which he said that if we didn't pay the seventeen hundred and fifty pounds we owed him he'd have to take possession of the farm."

"So the five hundred had become seventeen hundred and fifty pounds. You certainly belong to that section of the public which Mr. Creed would have wished to reach through the medium of the religious press."

"I myself was ill in bed when the letter came. Mother, seeing it was for me, didn't open it, and kept it for me till I was better. That was more

than a fortnight after it came. Then I wrote to Mr. Creed, but I've had no answer, so I've been wondering what he means to do. So I had to come and ask him. And now, sir, you say he's dead."

"Fortunately for you, Miss Bucknell, he died very soon after that letter was despatched. I'm his heir; he left me everything he had."

"Did he, sir? May I ask if you're his son?"

"I'm no relation of his. Why he left me his money I have yet to learn. In the meanwhile let me ask you, Miss Bucknell, not to worry. So soon as I am able, I will call on you at the Wish Farm, as Mr. Creed used to do. I have no doubt that we shall be able to arrange matters satisfactorily between us."

When the anxious lady, having done her best—in spite of his efforts to stop her—to express her gratitude, had departed, Mr. Adair soliloquised.

"Seventeen hundred and fifty pounds for five hundred—in two years! That's the way my money was made. If Jerningham Creed had lived a little longer I might have been the present possessor of the Wish Farm. It seems a pity that he should have died." There was a tapping at the door. "Who's that? Miss Bucknell returned? Come in!"

The door opened to admit a very different person from Miss Bucknell, a fairly tall, squarely built, powerful-looking man, whose appearance could hardly be described as prepossessing. When he saw Mr. Adair, he slipped rather than stepped into the room, closed the door, and stood with his back against it. There was something in the way in which he looked at the other which was

eminently unfriendly. There was a threat in the tone of his voice.

"So it's you!" he said.

"That is so. And it seems to be you. And who may you be?"

"Don't you know me? You think. You look round inside your head, and you'll remember who I am."

"I've seen some scoundrels in my time, and possibly you're one of them; I'm not able to say exactly which."

Adair's coolness seemed to annoy the other.

"That's the way you talk, is it? Seen some scoundrels, have you? So have I. I'm looking at one now, by —— I am!"

As he said this, the newcomer looked at Mr. Adair with something in his glance which was unpleasantly significant. He was a low-browed man, with a square face, and a still squarer jaw. His nose, with its wide nostrils, was not only flat, something seemed to have happened to it, so that it was a little on one side. He had high cheekbones, curiously small eyes. His mouth was huge. As he looked at Mr. Adair his lips, parting in an ungenial grin, showed that several of his front teeth were missing. Dark stubble covered the greater part of his skin, giving him an unwashed look. He wore a suit of dark grey tweed which was by no means new, the trousers of which were so tight that it was a wonder how he got into them, while the coat was buttoned so close to the neck that one wondered if the intention was to hide the absence of linen beneath. A red, bird's-eye cotton handkerchief twisted round his throat took the place of a collar. There was something about

the whole man which suggested a bull—his small eyes, unintellectual head, short neck, deep chest, broad shoulders. The fashion in which his coat sleeves seemed to fit his arms like gloves pointed to the presence of plenty of muscle beneath.

Mr. Adair was possibly taking in these details as he seemed to be considering what might be the meaning of the almost savage hostility with which the stranger regarded him. The question which he presently put suggested that, so far as he was concerned, the problem remained unsolved.

"You appear to be a pleasant sort of man. I really do not remember to have had the pleasure of meeting you before. You know who I am?"

The other's manner as he replied was almost ferocious.

"Do I know who you are? Come off of it! Where do you think I was that Tuesday night?"

Mr. Adair smiled, as if he was inclined to think the man was an amusing study.

"You pique my curiosity. To what Tuesday night do you refer?"

"The Wednesday morning. It was the Wednesday morning when the old man who lived here was found dead, wasn't it? And the night before was Tuesday. Very well, that's the Tuesday night I mean. Now you've got it."

"I do seem to have got something, but I'm afraid I don't quite know what."

The stranger's reply was curious, clearly conveying a meaning which was not on the surface.

"I've got the rope round your neck, that's what I've got."

"Have you? This is interesting. And what is the object of your visit here?"

"I didn't look to find you here, and so I tell you. You've got a nerve to show yourself inside this room. You must have some pretty deep game on, you must. It must be something very funny to bring you here. But since you are here I may as well have a bob or two."

"From whom?" Mr. Adair's smile was bland.

"Who from? Why, from you. How much money have you got on you?"

"I have quite a quantity."

"Then you've been lifting it. That's what your game is. You've had the nerve to come here and run the rule over that old man's things. All right, so be it. I'm willing, only we'll go halves, you and I, if you don't mind. To begin with, you turn your pockets out and let's see what's in them."

"That by way of a beginning? You have your own ideas. And after?"

"I'll show you what's after. You turn out your pockets—or shall I save you the trouble and do it for you?"

The stranger moved towards Mr. Adair with an air of truculence which some persons might have found uncomfortably suggestive. If it had any distressing effect on the gentleman approached, he managed to conceal the fact. His smile was, if anything, blander than before.

"What's your fighting weight?"

Not only the question, but the air of geniality with which it was asked, seemed to take the other by surprise. The tone in which he answered was one of concentrated scorn.

"My fighting weight? What are you playing at? Never you mind what my weight is. I suppose you're seven inches taller than me, my lad, but if you think that would help you if you and me got to business—why, you don't know what you're talking about. I could kill you inside three minutes. So none of your airs with me. You turn your pockets out on that table."

"I think," replied Mr. Adair mildly, "that I should like you to kill me first, the exercise might do me good."

"Exercise!" Some ill-sounding words came from the stranger's ugly mouth. "I'll give you exercise. I'm no man what you can do with as you please, don't you make any mistake about that. I'll darned soon show you!"

He clenched his fists.

In rather less than a quarter of an hour afterwards Mr. Adair strolled down the stone staircase into the court without. In the front doorway he was stopped by an undersized individual of dubious appearance.

"Where's my mate?" inquired this person.

"Your mate?" Adair regarded him genially. "I wonder if that's the gentleman I left upstairs."

"What's he doing upstairs?"

"That's what I rather want to know. Perhaps you wouldn't mind stepping upstairs to give me the benefit of your opinion. This way."

Mr. Adair went first—the other followed. He seemed to be in a state of some mental uncertainty as he ascended. A remark he made showed it:

"This ain't nothing you're playing off on me,

governor? If it is, you be advised by me and drop it. It ain't safe to try and play with me."

"I shouldn't think it was." They had reached the landing outside Mr. Creed's chambers. "This is where I left your mate. Step inside; don't be afraid. My intentions are perfectly honest, and most straightforward."

The undersized person evinced a decided reluctance to accept Mr. Adair's invitation.

"I don't doubt what you say, but if it's all the same to you, perhaps you wouldn't mind going in first."

"Don't be an idiot! After you."

Before he appeared to know it the stranger found himself inside the room. He was obviously startled.

"Here," he exclaimed, a little late in the day, "don't you lay your hands on me!"

"Is that your mate?" Mr. Adair pointed to a figure which lay prone on the floor. The person addressed stared at this figure as if amazed.

"Why, what's happened? What's come to him?"

"He and I have been having a little argument. He started out to kill me, and—now I'm wondering if I've killed him."

The stranger regarded Adair as if he had seen something incredible.

"You've had an argument with him? What, with the Mauler? Do you mean you've been having a go at him with the knuckles? And you've outed him? Why, there ain't half a dozen men in London who could live with him through a couple of rounds, especially with the bare ones."

"He had some pretty ideas on the subject of how to use them, as I found. I caught him on the point

of the chin, and down he went, and there he stopped. The question is, hadn't you better fetch a doctor? He mayn't be dead."

"Dead! What, the Mauler dead! Go on!" The speaker, kneeling, addressed himself to the recumbent figure: "Mauler! Here, Sam! Don't say he's done you in! What, a bloke like him? Don't say it, Sam!"

For some seconds Sam said nothing. The man kneeling at his side, taking him by the right shoulder, began to shake him. As if the movement had roused him from sleep, all at once Sam's body twitched. He seemed to be making an effort to stretch himself. He muttered in guttural tones:

"Here, what's the game?"

Mr. Adair, looking down at him, smiled.

"It appears," he observed, "that Sam isn't dead."

CHAPTER IV.

IN SEARCH OF ROOMS.

MARTIN ADAIR resided in what was called a bed-sitting-room, in a street leading off Drury Lane. Bed-sitting-room was the flattering description which the frowsy landlady applied to it. In reality it was an ill-furnished, unclean garret —not at all fitted to be the residence of a gentleman of means. Having clothed himself in garments better suited to his new station, and which did fit him, Mr. Adair proceeded to provide himself with more appropriate quarters. He had a conference on the subject with Mr. Foster.

"I don't quite know what to do," he told that gentleman. "I don't want to go to an hotel, for various reasons; I don't see myself in a house all alone. I think it will have to be rooms—nice rooms —in some pleasant residential quarter."

"What are you going to do about the business? Even if you propose to attend every day you ought to have someone in charge who is capable of representing you."

This conversation took place in Mr. Foster's chambers. There was a piece of white cardboard

on the table, which Mr. Adair annexed. He made free with the lawyer's pens and ink. Presently he held up the piece of cardboard with this legend inscribed on it in large characters:

"OUT FOR THE DAY—BUSINESS SUSPENDED—CALL AGAIN."

"I'm going to sport the oak in old Creed's chambers, and I'm going to hang that up outside. Letters may be passed through the opening intended for them—callers can't. If they like they can call again. If they do it is probable they will still find this suspended on the oak. That's how I propose to carry on the business. When I choose to go there I shall, when I don't I shan't—the business be hanged!"

The lawyer regarded him with inquisitive eyes.

"What's the idea? The business is a valuable asset. Why should you throw away all that money when by paying a man, say a hundred and fifty a year, you need do nothing of the kind?"

"Foster, I'm very much obliged to you for your very kind advice, and I'm very pleased to have it; but when it isn't invited I fear you'll find that it's very seldom taken. Once more, to avoid any possibility of future misunderstanding, do I gather that Mr. Jerningham Creed left me everything he had to do with as I please?"

"Precisely; then that's how it is." Mr. Adair, rising from the seat, held the piece of cardboard out in front of him.

I'll fasten this to the oak with my own hands

to make sure that it's there. Then I'll seek fresh quarters."

Some days passed. One afternoon, still in quest of the sort of habitation he required, Mr. Adair found himself in Putney—in a lane opening on to Barnes Common. Perhaps it was an avenue rather than a lane, because there was an asphalt path on both sides, and lamps, and houses. Some of the houses were big ones—what might fairly be called mansions. Presently he came to one which was little more than a cottage The walls were covered with ivy, the roof was tiled, there was a little garden, an old-fashioned hedge in front, and in one of the windows was a card—" Apartments." This card caught Mr. Adair's eye. He paused to study it. Then he opened the gate, went to the front door, and rang the bell. Some moments passed, and no one answered.

" It looks as if no one were at home," was his comment. " I'll ring again." He did; still no sign that anyone heard. " It will be a nuisance if everyone is out. I'll try again."

He rang a third time. After another interval, his attentive ear caught what seemed to him to be sounds within. " There's someone moving; someone is at home. Is it a case of being stone deaf? —or why no answer? "

He sounded another peal; clearly this time he had been heard. Someone was unlocking and opening the door from within.

" Considering that they've got ' apartments ' in the window they seem to take precious good care to guard themselves against intrusion. Probably some ancient creature is the sole inhabitant. As from the outside the house promises just the sort of thing I

want, that will be a pity. I wonder who is going to open the door ? "

When the door was opened, and a girl stood looking out at him, apparently his wonder grew. As the door was opened wider—which it was by inches, as if the person who held the handle was reluctant to open it at all—and he began to perceive more clearly who was on the other side, judging from his demeanour, instead of a creature of flesh and blood, he might have been confronted by some terrifying phantom ; and yet the person who stood inside the still only partially-opened door was nothing but a girl.

And a very prepossessing specimen of her kind, with nice hair, nice eyes, and what was of almost more importance, a nice mouth, with, as her partially-opened lips revealed, nice, small, white teeth beyond. There was certainly nothing in her appearance calculated to alarm the average man, yet that she had a very remarkable and unusual effect upon the man of six foot two was clear. The odd part of it was that she seemed almost as much perturbed as he did.

They stared at each other for some moments without either speaking. Then, in distinctly tremulous tones, she asked :

" What—what do you want ? What name, please ? "

Obviously he had to make an effort before he was able to answer her at all. When, as it were, he had pulled himself together, he still seemed to be at a loss, as if he had not quite followed her meaning. He stammered almost more than she had done.

" I've—I've—come to see the apartments."

"Apartments!" She started, as if the word were one which she had never heard before. She gave a sort of little gasp. "Oh!" Then, after a moment's hesitation, added: "I'm—I'm afraid we haven't any to let."

"But there's a card in the window.. It says 'Apartments' on the card."

"Does it? I—I'd forgotten there was a card in the window."

"Are the rooms already let?"

"No, they're not let; only——"

She stopped, as if unable, or unwilling, to finish her sentence.

"Only what?" He seemed to be regaining the presence of mind which in such odd fashion he had so suddenly lost. As she seemed to be seeking in vain for words to reply, he went on, "If the rooms are not let, if you don't mind I should like to see them."

As he made a forward movement she fell back. He entered the house. She still stayed silent.

"Which are the rooms?"

"These—these are the rooms."

She opened a door on her left, which he passed through. He looked about him.

"I suppose this is the sitting-room?"

"Yes, that's the sitting-room. The bedroom is above; but I don't think we ought to let the rooms."

"May I ask why, if they are unoccupied? Do you mean that they're promised to someone?"

"No, they're not promised; I should like very much to let them; only I don't think I ought."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow you; if they are unoccupied, and not promised, and you would like

to let them, why shouldn't you let them?" He had recovered himself sufficiently to smile at her. "May I ask what is the rent you want?"

"We thought of asking three guineas a week. You see, they're good rooms and well furnished, and there's a bathroom, and no extras."

"Three guineas a week will suit me very well. They are, I think, just the sort of rooms I want."

"But you haven't seen the bedroom. It's a very good room, not like one in an ordinary lodging-house. I think you would find it very comfortable."

"I'll see it presently; in the meanwhile I'll take your word for it, Miss —— By what name ought I to address you?"

"My name?" Again an odd look came into her eyes; she seemed to shiver. "My name is—is Dennis, Winifred Dennis."

"And mine, Miss Dennis, is Adair—Martin Adair. When would it be convenient to you for me to enter into occupation?"

"Occupation? Do you mean when could you come?"

"As regards a reference, I shall be happy to refer you to my solicitor, Mr. Edward Foster, of Gray's Inn Buildings. But, after all, the best form of guarantee of a lodger's stability is, perhaps, his willingness to pay cash. You say three guineas a week. I shall be happy, Miss Dennis, if you will allow me, to pay a month's rent in advance. I'm rather anxious to get out of my present rooms, in which I am not at all comfortable, so perhaps you will permit me to enter into my tenancy to-morrow. If that arrangement is satisfactory to you, here are twelve guineas."

"Twelve guineas!" The girl's breath seemed to

come more quickly as she repeated the words. She watched him taking out the money with wide-open eyes. "If you were to give me twelve guineas——" Pausing, she seemed to change the shape of her sentence: "If you give me twelve guineas, you can have the rooms."

The matter was settled—in a fashion which, on both sides, was informal and unbusinesslike. He handed over the twelve guineas without taking a receipt; she never proffered one. He asked no particulars about other inmates of the house; made no inquiries as to the sort of cooking he might expect; did not even see the bedroom he was to have; in short, did none of those things which the ordinary man engaging lodgings is very careful to do. He departed on the understanding that on the morrow he should return to The Dovecote—which was the name painted on the garden gate—with his luggage, and enter into possession of his rooms. He said nothing about the time of day he proposed for his return, nor whether he would be there for lunch or for dinner. He said nothing about meals or food, and the girl did not inquire. The consciousness of these omissions began to force itself upon him as he walked back to Putney station.

"I seem to have made a pretty mess of the business—upon my word I do. Considering her willingness to let the rooms I couldn't have been more confiding. When I get back to-morrow I may find her gone—with my twelve guineas. I have nothing whatever to show that she ever had them. She mayn't be the person entitled to receive payment; I may find a Gorgon of a landlady awaiting me, who'll present me with the ordinary bill at the end of the week."

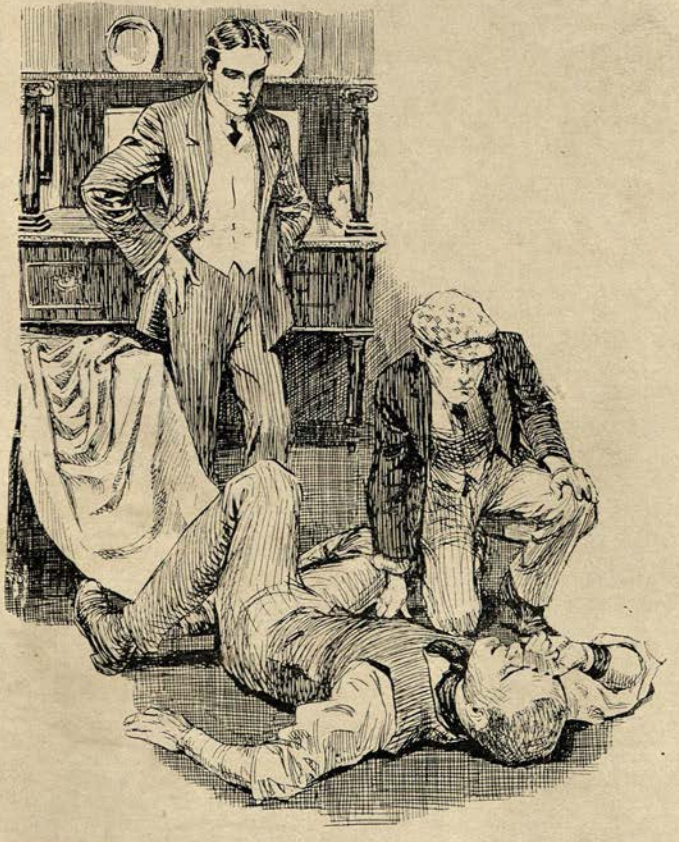
He struck the ground with his stick, and laughed aloud; passers-by turned to look at the tall man, wondering what amused him. His mood changed; he frowned.

"When I first saw her standing in the doorway," he said to himself, "you might have knocked me down with a feather. It was she. I'll swear it was she; I'm not likely to be mistaken about a thing like that. I wish I could forget. In the name of all that's wonderful, what does it mean?"

As he returned in the train to Waterloo, perhaps, not unnaturally, his thoughts were still concerned with his new quarters.

"Of all the amazing things that ever happened, that I should have come upon her like that. She didn't know me. It wasn't the sight of my face which startled her—it was something else. I wonder what. Why did she keep on insisting that she oughtn't to let the rooms when she wanted so much to let them? And why was her mind so quickly made up when I offered to pay her twelve guineas in advance? Is she the mistress of the house? What an idiot I was not to ask; but there was something about her which prevented my putting questions, to say nothing of the fact that I myself was in such a state of flurry. She can't be alone in the house—that's impossible—yet she said nothing about anyone else being there, and I didn't hear a sound. All the while I was talking to her she was afraid, not of me, but of something else. Can it have been? No, it couldn't. I daresay that I shall find there's a very simple explanation of the lady's agitation; perhaps after I've been there a week or two we shall laugh together at the recollection. A third person would have set

us down as a pair of moonstruck gabies. So far as I'm concerned it was only to be expected that I should be moon-struck; the last thing I expected to see was she. It's impossible that I could be mistaken—it was she. She has been present to my mind's eye, sleeping and waking, for how many weeks? And that I should have seen her—a creature of real flesh and blood—standing inside that door!" He drew a long breath. "I have pretty strong nerves, but it wasn't strange that for some seconds they were all just anyhow. What on earth does the thing mean?"



"'It appears,' he observed, 'that Sam isn't dead.'"

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CHAPTER V.

SUDDEN NOTICE.

MARTIN ADAIR entered into occupation of his rooms at The Dovecote on Wednesday, May the thirteenth. It was beautiful weather. He thought as the cab drew up at the gate what a charming place it seemed. There was no delay this time in answering his ring; the door was opened almost as soon as he touched the bell. Miss Dennis appeared upon the other side. On that occasion there was none of that confusion which had marked the deportment of both parties on the previous day. Miss Dennis positively smiled at him.

"I forgot to ask you yesterday what time you would be here. It was too stupid of me, because this morning I had to go out. As I didn't know what address to write to, I pinned a piece of paper on the front door, telling you what time I should be back. You would have had to go without lunch if you had come."

"I also was conscious of my shortcomings in not being more explicit. I thought if I came about tea-time I should be pretty safe." The girl, leading the way up the staircase, conducted him to a really

charming apartment on the first floor. "Is this my bedroom? This is splendid! By the way, Miss Dennis, you spoke about going out this morning, as if there would be no one to let me in if I arrived during your absence. You don't mean to say that you're alone in the house?"

There was a momentary silence before she answered.

"My mother and I are alone in the house. Mother is a great invalid. I ought to have told you yesterday that we keep no servant. We—we can't afford one; but I don't think you'll find I'm a bad cook." A wistful look came on her face and in her eyes. "If you'll have a little patience with me and give me a fair trial, I'll—I'll do my very best to give you satisfaction, Mr. Adair."

He had no answer ready; the girl's manner clogged his tongue. He apostrophised her when she had gone.

"It gives a man the fidgets when she expresses a hope that she'll give him satisfaction as a cook. That she should have to do that sort of thing at all! She is gently bred, and looks to me as if she had never done a stroke of work in her life. And she's to fill the place of a general servant—that won't do at all. I'm not going to have her sweeping out my sitting-room and tidying up after me. Before I've been here a week I'll engage a servant—a regular paragon—on my own account. I can afford to pay her—and I will."

But the matter proved not to be so simple as he supposed. His calculations were upset by the fact that Miss Dennis turned out to be a much more experienced housewife than he had imagined. She

got through the work in a manner which puzzled him. By the time he got down in the morning everything was spick and span. Breakfast was on the table as soon as he appeared; all his meals were punctual and well cooked. The girl brought the things in and out of the room, and that was practically all he saw of her. She did the ordering of the provisions—she told him that she preferred to do so. It struck him that her intention was to give him as few opportunities of talking to her as she could. While he was amazed at the tact and skill with which she attended to his physical well-being, he was inclined to resent the fashion in which she managed to get through day after day without their exchanging half a dozen sentences. Yet, resentful though he was disposed to be, he could not but admire the ingenuity with which she evaded him.

Of her mother he saw and heard nothing. He inquired after her once or twice, but the girl's answers were of a kind which did not invite a further show of interest. He did not even know in what part of the house the old lady was. The only two rooms in the house of which he had seen anything were those he occupied. Quite conscious that it was no concern of his, and that Miss Dennis was justified in keeping her own counsel, being just then a tolerably idle man, he was perhaps the more disposed to engage himself in matters which were no actual affair of his. The part of the house in which Mrs. Dennis might be became quite a problem to him. One morning, as Miss Dennis was removing his breakfast things, he asked her the question point blank.

"By the way, whereabouts in the house is your mother, Miss Dennis—upstairs or down?"

The girl was collecting her breakfast things upon a tray. She had a plate in one hand and a dish in the other. For just an instant she stopped. Her hands shook; then, bringing the plate and dish together with rather a clash, she continued her work more hurriedly. Then, picking up the tray, going with it towards the door—how often had he found it difficult to avoid asking her to let him carry that heavy tray?—she paused to remark:

"Will you be in at the usual hour for lunch, Mr. Adair?"

He eyed her. She met his glance quite steadily, seeming to ignore the smile by which it was accompanied.

"I think I will take lunch in town."

So soon as he had said it she went out of the room. He stared at the door which she had closed behind her.

"Now what's the meaning of that? She heard my question; why couldn't she answer it? Is her mother's whereabouts in the house a mystery? It's a very funny thing."

His tone almost suggested irritation. He unfolded his paper, looked at it, then lowered it, and stared again at the door.

"That girl's beginning to possess me; I don't know why, but she is. I'm getting a trick of thinking of nothing else but her; it's — it's absurd."

He returned to the newspaper, ran his glance hurriedly over it, then lowered it again.

"All I can say is, if her mother is an invalid, she

was pretty active last night. Nor is that the first time I have observed her nocturnal activity. It must have been midnight before I got into bed; then everything was still enough. Then something woke me. I heard movements downstairs—sounds of voices. I was just thinking of getting up to offer my services in case anything was wrong, when the sounds ceased. I looked at my watch; it was nearly twenty minutes past two. Just as I was dozing off again I heard what I am convinced was the click of the hasp of the front gate. Miss Dennis had had a visitor—at that hour of the morning. I went to the window to see who it was. It was pitch dark, there was nothing to be seen. It might have been a burglar. I went out on to the landing with some idea of going round the house, but as everything was perfectly still, I thought better of it and went back to bed. Considering how she takes care that I should confine myself to my own apartments, I could picture the look with which she would regard me if she caught me prowling about in my dressing-gown and pyjamas."

Once more he went back to his paper, grumbling to himself as he read it.

"It might have been getting on for three, but if she was up—and I could have declared I heard her voice—she shows no signs of having had a broken night. The next time I hear the garden gate opened at that hour of the morning I'll find out who has opened it."

He seemed all at once to be struck by the unreasonableness of his own attitude.

"Confound it! I'm becoming quite a Meddlesome Matty! What affair of mine is it what visitors she

receives, and when ; or which room in the house her mother occupies ? "

That week-end Mr. Adair ran over to Paris. He had an uncomfortable and, as he told himself, ridiculous feeling that something was going on at The Dovecote which, just then, made his presence unwelcome—so he took himself away. He left on the Friday, and returned on the following Wednesday. He made the acquaintance of a man in the Paris hotel, with whom he returned to London. The boat had a very rough passage ; the passengers did not get to London till late. Adair wired to The Dovecote telling them not to sit up for him—that he would let himself in when he returned. He had a very late dinner with his acquaintance, then spent an hour or two with him in his rooms in Devonshire Place, returning to Putney in a taxi-cab, which he dismissed at the end of the lane. It was a fine night, or rather morning : all the world seemed asleep. He walked up the hill towards The Dovecote and had nearly reached it when he became aware that at least in that house someone was still awake. Voices reached his ear—not soft ones. Someone seemed to be shouting. He stood still. It sounded as if in The Dovecote something unusual was happening. Several people seemed to be speaking together, all of them in angry tones. All at once a sound rose above the others—a sound which was very like a woman's scream, as if she were shrieking either in fear or pain. An exclamation broke from Mr. Adair.

" That's Winifred Dennis. Something's up ! "

He hurried towards the house, from which he was distant half a dozen paces. As he reached it,

someone from the back of the house came hurrying along the garden path, as if unconscious that anyone was there. He stood a little in the shadow, which was perhaps why he remained invisible.

"It's Miss Dennis," he told himself. "Where can she be going at this hour? Can anything have happened to her mother?"

As the garden gate opened, he moved forward, hat in hand.

"Miss Dennis," he observed, "is there anything I can do for you? I hope there's nothing wrong."

Coming on her so unexpectedly, since she could hardly have been aware of his neighbourhood, it was not strange that his voice and appearance should have startled her. She shrank back so suddenly that her foot seemed to catch in her skirt. She stumbled. Fearing she might fall, he put his hand upon her shoulder. Clearly his assistance was not required. She drew herself suddenly straight, and, stepping a little back, struck him, first with her left and then with her right fist, full in the face, rushed through the gate, and went scurrying down the lane like a hare.

To say that he was amazed would be to describe his state of mind—and body—but lamely. The blows had been pretty hard ones. One of them had reached his mouth; he was not sure that it had not cut his lip. The other had struck him with surprising force upon the cheek bone. He felt more than a trifle stunned. It was some moments before he was able to put his feelings into words; then they were strong ones.

"Well, I'm hanged! If that isn't the top brick off the chimney. That wasn't Miss Dennis—it was

a man in a woman's things, which explains why he caught himself in his skirt and nearly tripped himself up. It's a garment which he isn't accustomed to wear. He was handier with his fists—those were two nice ones which he got home. What a fool he must have thought me to give him such an opening! I should like to have a chance of returning them. My word! If he hadn't, for the moment, nearly knocked the sense right out of me, I might have had one, too. What in thunder was he doing in The Dovecote in woman's clothes? He certainly was no burglar; someone let him out of the back door. It appears that after all I've come back before my presence is desired. I wonder if this time any explanation will be offered."

None was. As he walked up the garden path, along which that petticoated figure had so recently rushed, with such dire results to Martin Adair, all was still again. So far as he could perceive, the entire house was in darkness. He walked round to the back of the house to see if there were any lights there. There appeared to be none. He tried the handle of the back entrance. It seemed to be both locked and bolted. There was nothing to show that anyone was awake and about in the shrouded house, or that so singular a figure had lately come out of it.

He let himself in with his latchkey at the front door. He could not tell whether anyone heard—there was no challenging voice. There was food on a tray in his sitting-room, which he left untouched. Everything, apparently, was prepared for his return.

In the morning, descending at the usual hour,

Miss Dennis brought him his breakfast. He glanced at her.

"I hope I didn't disturb you by my late return?"

"I heard you come in," she said.

He noticed how pale she was, and that she seemed flurried. Before he could decide what else to say to her, besides the exchange of the most ordinary greetings, she was gone. As was apt to be the case, then he made certain comments to himself.

"There is something wrong. This time I'm going to know what it is. She looks as if she were worried half out of her life; she seems to have aged since I went away in less than a week. This time I am going to find out what's the matter, let her resent my questions as she likes. I'll wait till she comes back again."

When she did come back again it was not necessary for him to ask questions—she began on her own account. He had intended to open the conversation while she was performing her duties, but she began the moment she was in the room. Coming forward, she leaned upon the edge of the table, as if she found its support desirable. There was an expression on her face and in her eyes which moved him more than he could have thought was possible. He would have liked to offer her a chair, only he dared not. Her voice, usually so round and true, was tremulous and broken. She seemed to find it difficult to speak—as if her breath kept failing her.

"I—I—I'm sorry to have to tell you, Mr. Adair, that—that—you must go."

"Go!" He stared at her in astonishment; that was not at all what he had expected to hear. "You

are not well, Miss Dennis. Let me beg you to sit down; I'll get you a chair."

"No, I won't sit down; I—I'm quite well, thank you." She seemed to make an effort at self-control; words came more freely. "You remember that I told you when you first came to see the rooms that I didn't think I ought to let them?"

"But why must I go? Won't you explain, Miss Dennis? Have I done anything to annoy you? Have you found me a troublesome tenant?"

"No, I haven't; but—I can't explain. I can only tell you you must go at once."

"At once? What do you mean by at once?"

"Before—before—half-past ten."

"Before half-past ten? Why, it's nearly ten o'clock now! You're not serious, Miss Dennis? You're not proposing to turn me out of the house at less than half an hour's notice? There must be some very extraordinary reason which is inducing you to act in such a way. Suppose I decline to go? I should be quite within my rights. I don't wish to say anything unpleasant, but when you talk about my being out of the house by half-past ten, in less than half an hour, I'm compelled to remind you that you're in my debt—I'm not in yours. The period for which I made you an advance payment has still two or three days to run."

"Yes, I—I know; that makes it so dreadful. And I can't give you your money back again—I haven't got it."

The girl's state of distress was hurting him each moment more and more. He became desperate.

"Excuse me, Miss Dennis; but matters have reached a point when I must ask you to forgive me

if I seem to thrust myself into your private affairs. You said nothing about my going before I left last Friday."

"I—I hoped that it wouldn't be necessary."

"And what, in so short a space of time, has made it necessary? Are you in want of money? You must forgive my speaking bluntly, but if that is the case I am prepared to make you an advance payment on account of these rooms to practically any extent you please; but I decline to be turned out of them—that's final!"

The girl seemed to try her best to continue to regard him steadily, and to keep herself straight up; but her eyes were all at once blinded by tears; she sank down on to the chair which she had hitherto refused, dropped her head on to the white tablecloth, and began to cry in a fashion which terrified Mr. Adair. He stared at her dumbfounded.

"Good gracious!" he stammered, "Miss Dennis, don't do that sort of thing. I didn't mean to be a brute. I'll get out of the house inside five minutes if you like. I only wish you to understand that if you want a friend—or—or help, or anything of that kind, you might count on me, that's all. But if you're so anxious that I should leave your house——"

"I'm not anxious! I don't want you to go!"

The wail came from the head on the tablecloth. As he listened, Mr. Adair's confusion seemed to increase.

"But if you're not anxious that I should go—if you don't want me to go——" His sentence remained unfinished, because she interrupted him.

"It's not a question of what I want. Can't you

understand? You'll have to go! You can't stay here!—you can't!"

"I'm sorry, Miss Dennis, but I cannot, and do not, understand. If, as you put it, you don't want me to go—why can't I stay?"

"Because"—she raised her face from the table-cloth, with the tears streaming down her cheeks, and did her best to meet his eyes—"Because there'll be no furniture left in the house. You can't sleep on nothing, and have your meals on the floor."

CHAPTER VI.

THE LADY AND THE LODGER.

MARTIN ADAIR, in front of the fireplace, his mouth a little open, his eyes extended to their fullest capacity, stood gazing at the girl, as if surprise had deprived him of the use of his tongue. Several seconds slipped away before he seemed to recover it.

"But I understand you less than ever, Miss Dennis. May I ask you to explain what you mean?"

"I mean exactly what I say. Now you've forced me to, I'll tell you everything. I didn't mean to inflict on you my private troubles, but since you seem to be incapable of taking a hint, you leave me with no alternative."

The lady had risen from her chair. Her eyes were still a little dim, but the pallor had gone from her cheeks—they were red instead. She seemed suddenly to be in rather a tempestuous state of mind. Her quick passage from one mood to another disconcerted the man in front of her.

"I assure you, Miss Dennis, I have not the slightest wish to thrust myself into your private affairs."

She cut him short.

"You say that now when you insisted on my explaining why you had to go. I tell you quite clearly, since you insist, that you'll have to go before half-past ten, because after that time there won't be an article of furniture left in the house."

"But why? Is an earthquake going to swallow them up?"

"Mr. Jerningham Creed's solicitors are going to take them all away. They're going to strip the house."

"Who? What? What's that you say?"

"Oh, I'll tell you everything! It doesn't matter now; everybody will know in a few minutes. I—that's to say we—I mean I—borrowed some money from a moneylender named Creed—Jerningham Creed. I have not been able to pay off the instalments as they fell due; this morning I have had this letter from his solicitors—Messrs. Issachar and Daniel. Now you have the whole sordid truth."

She produced an envelope from some hiding-place in her blouse and flourished it in front of her.

"Is—is that a letter from Messrs. Issachar and Daniel?"

"It is—you can read it if you like." She handed it to him across the table."

"Thank you—I should like." He read with the closest attention the communication which it contained. "I see that Messrs. Issachar and Daniel give you notice that unless the three hundred and fifty pounds due from you to the late Mr. Jerningham Creed, together with seventy-five pounds for interest and fines, and five pounds their costs, making altogether four hundred and thirty pounds, are not paid to-morrow, that is, this Thursday morning, before

half-past ten, the contents of your house will be taken away." Mr. Adair looked up from the letter across at the girl. "That's a nice letter—a very nice letter, upon my word!"

"You think so, do you? Then I don't. I think it's a horrible, cruel letter. You see they say I owe them three hundred and fifty pounds. I never had more than two hundred, and I'm sure I've paid Mr. Creed more than that. I never could understand how he made out that the more I paid him the more I owed. Then there's seventy pounds for interest and fines, and five pounds for costs. How do they make out that I owe them that money? I gave them the twelve guineas you gave me for the rooms."

"Oh, you did, did you?" This was an interpolation from the gentleman.

"Yes, I did; and they wouldn't give me a receipt for it. That was the same with Mr. Creed. Unless I paid him the whole instalment which he said was due he wouldn't give me a receipt. And as I had to pay in driblets which he would not allow to decrease the debt, the more I paid the more I seemed to owe. And now they're going to take away the furniture, because I haven't a penny piece in the world, and you will have to go. I don't suppose you'll like to stay here when there isn't so much as a chair in the house to sit upon."

"No, Miss Dennis, I certainly should not. I like to have at least one chair to sit upon."

"There you are; I knew you were that kind of man. So now you understand why you'll have to go!"

"No, Miss Dennis; that is exactly what I don't understand. Indeed, I don't understand the whole

of this business; but I intend to understand it very thoroughly before long."

"I'm sure I've done my best to make it plain to you."

"You have; I admit it willingly. I'm very much obliged to you for the pains you have taken. Now will you permit me to say just one thing, and that is, that I don't intend to go?"

"What? After what I've just been explaining to you, and your saying that you must have a chair to sit upon?"

"I'm going to have several chairs to sit upon. I'm going to have all these chairs—so are you!"

"Don't be ridiculous! You can't keep those men from taking them away. They're all of them in the bill of sale. I remember the wording quite well—it said the entire contents of the house."

"Possibly. All the same I'm going to prevent anyone from taking so much as an egg-cup from this house. In other words, I'm going to settle with Messrs. Issachar and Daniel."

"You're going to settle? You! Do you think I'd let you?"

"You can't stop me, Miss Dennis?"

"Why are you putting that letter in your pocket?"

"Because I'm going to pay a visit to Messrs. Issachar and Daniel, and propose to favour them with the sight of it."

"With the sight of their own letter? What do you mean? I'm very much obliged to you, Mr. Adair. I don't understand the position you're taking up, but I can assure you that I've not the slightest intention of allowing you to interfere between Messrs. Issachar and Daniel and me. The

money was borrowed from Mr. Creed, and it's going to be repaid. If I can't pay it in any other way, I'm going to let them have my furniture."

"Exactly, Miss Dennis. Your sentiments do you the greatest possible credit. I'm going out, but I shall be back for dinner."

"You'll be back for dinner! Don't I tell you——"

"I tell you, Miss Dennis, that I shall be back for dinner. You'll be so good as to let me have something rather nice. I have been to Paris, and have missed your cookery."

"Do you think I'm going to let you see those men? Do you really think so, Mr. Adair?"

"I do, because you can't stop me. I've the right to call upon a firm of lawyers if I choose. I know Messrs. Issachar and Daniel very well; a finer pair of scoundrels don't exist in London. You needn't distress yourself in the slightest degree about the safety of your furniture. It's yours; and will continue yours. You owe nothing to these blackguards, as in the course of the day shall be made clear to you. If you'll kindly stand away from that door, Miss Dennis, I shall be able to pass."

She had placed herself in such a position that it almost seemed her intention was to prevent him leaving the room. When he went close to her, something which she saw in his face caused her to move aside. As he was opening the door, she exclaimed, the words bursting from her with singular unexpectedness:

"What's the matter with your lip?"

He looked at her, and he smiled.

"I fancy I must have cut myself," he said.

CHAPTER VII.

AN EXPLANATION.

MESSRS. ISSACHAR AND DANIEL'S offices were in Bouverie Street, on the top floor of an ancient building. Mr. Adair, entering unannounced a room in which both partners happened at that moment to be, greeted them with a reference to the height of their offices above the ground.

"I say, you two, if I were you, you know, I should feel rather shy of being up here, all this way above the earth. Think what it might mean if someone were to throw you out of the window. Someone is sure to do it one day, and how far you'd have to fall!"

Both partners glanced round at him in a manner which suggested that his appearance was more than unexpected—that it was unwelcome. A clerk was peeping through the doorway by which Mr. Adair had just come; he was apparently perturbed, as if his conscience smote him.

"If you please, Mr. Issachar, I told this gentleman you were engaged, but he nearly pitched me into the fireplace when I tried to stop him coming in."

Mr. Adair smiled at the clerk.

"Come, come," he said, "you are putting it rather strongly; and anyhow it would not have hurt the fireplace."

Mr. Issachar, who had been seated, stood up and glared at the visitor with what he perhaps meant to be a bellicose air.

"You've no right to force your way into our office when the clerk tells you we're engaged. And I'll tell you this, Mr. Adair, we don't want to see you anyhow, and we won't. Now it is you who are trespassing, so perhaps you'll take yourself off, without a word. We don't want any scene, and we have nothing to say to you."

"I think it is possible that you have nothing which you wish to say to me, Mr. Issachar, but there is something which I must say to you, so I am going to say it. Now, my child!"

The last words were addressed to the juvenile clerk, who still peered into the chamber. Without any warning of his intention, Mr. Adair thrust him back, drew the door to, locked it, and pocketed the door-key. Both partners showed signs of being excited.

"None of that, Adair!" cried Mr. Daniel. "None of that! Don't you think we'll stand that sort of thing, because we won't. You put back the key into the lock and open the door."

"If you don't," chimed in his partner, "I shall ring the bell, and I shall have the police sent for. You'd cut a pretty figure in the dock at Bow Street."

"I'm thinking that you'd look rather well in that position, Issachar, and it's one which I shouldn't wonder if you very shortly filled. Don't you worry

yourselves, my dear sirs,—you can ring the bell, you can ring half a dozen bells, you can make any sort of noise you like. I'm not going to leave this room, nor am I going to allow our interview to be interrupted, till I have said all that I have to say to you. Sit down, sit down, don't make a fuss, you'll do no good. You're a pretty pair of rascals!"

With an air of the utmost affability, the visitor placed himself on a seat, which he drew close up to the table. He had not removed his hat, and he carried a cane in his hand, with which, leaning over, he tapped Mr. Issachar playfully on the arm. Mr. Issachar objected.

"Don't you touch me with your stick!" he cried. "That's assault and battery. I warn you that you'll be made to pay for it. We're not going to stand any more of your nonsense, are we, Daniel?"

He appealed to his partner in the apparent hope that his corroboration would have on him that bracing effect of which he clearly stood in need. Mr. Daniel sustained him with all the emphasis at his command.

"We are not. Don't let him make any error. You be careful, Adair; by gosh, you'd better! I ask you once more, before Mr. Issachar rings the bell, are you going to leave this room, or are we to send for the police?"

Ignoring the inquiry, Mr. Adair held out a sheet of paper.

"Which of you animals wrote this? Or was it written by some starveling clerk in accordance with your instructions? In case you should not see clearly what it is, I'll tell you. It's a letter which was received this morning by Miss Dennis, of The

Dovecote, Putney. It purports to have come from this office. Did it ? "

Both gentlemen seemed reluctant to speak. They glanced at each other as if unpleasantly surprised. Presently Mr. Daniel made a suggestion.

" Let me see what the letter is. How can I tell what it is without looking ? It may be anything. Let me look at it ! "

" You can look at it from where you are. I've told you what it is, and you know. Now what am I to do with you two beauties ? Issachar, hadn't you better ring the bell and let us have the police ? You have been trying to get money by means of threats and false pretences out of an unprotected woman—you've had some out of her already. Where's this bill of sale of which you speak in this letter ? Do you hear, Issachar ? " He raised his voice so suddenly that the gentleman addressed gave a little jump. " Will you answer me, or must I throw you from the window ? "

A grey tint seemed to be showing through the bristles about Mr. Issachar's unshaven jaw and chin. His hands were tremulous.

" It's like this, Mr. Adair ; I'll tell you how it was, and Daniel here will bear me out. We were instructed by Mr. Creed some time before he was murdered to act for him in the matter, and—well—in a way we continue to act for him."

" So it seems, in a way. And how about me ? Where do I come in ? Were you, in a way, acting for me ? "

" Not—not exactly, Mr. Adair." All at once Mr. Issachar became confidential. His demeanour suggested that he was trying to get his courage up.

"It's like this, I'll just show you how it was. You see, the accounts got a little confused. Mr. Creed owed us money, and we took over certain little matters, as it were, to balance what he owed us. That's how it was, isn't it, Mr. Daniel?"

"That's how it was, Mr. Issachar. Yes, Mr. Adair, that's exactly as it was, as Issachar says."

Mr. Daniel seemed to try to do his best to look as if he believed his own words and his partner's. The effort was rather a failure. Mr. Issachar went gaily on.

"And one of the matters we took over was the bill of sale on The Dovecote. And, of course, as we've been out of our money a good time, and the whole thing is a lot overdue, we—we had to do something, hadn't we, Daniel?"

Mr. Daniel put his finger up to his neck and pulled up his collar.

"Of course we had; certainly we had. Mr. Adair will see we had—he's a reasonable man. We're men of business. We are not rolling in riches as he is now. Of course we had to do something, so—so we did it. What objection have you to make, Mr. Adair?"

By this time Mr. Daniel had recovered a certain amount of his assurance; he had even got so far as to stand, with his feet well apart, his hands thrust deep into his trouser pockets, regarding the visitor with a sort of defiant smile. Mr. Issachar seemed to gain in impudence as his partner did.

"I suppose, Mr. Adair, we're right to try to get our money, although we're not quite good enough for a fine gentleman like you? You are looking different from what you were the first time I saw

you, Mr. Adair, or, for the matter of that, the last time either. Isn't he, Daniel?"

"A bit of money does make a difference in the appearance of a man. You look, Mr. Adair, as if you'd been wallowing in it all your life. Mr. Adair looks quite the aristocrat, doesn't he, Issachar?"

"Every inch of him. Wonderful, Mr. Adair, how a man's real character does come out; anyone could see now that you're a gentleman born and bred."

"When you have both quite finished, and before you have wasted all your sweetness, let me ask if you expect me to believe a word you say? You pair of liars!" The speaker smiled as he said this, in a way his listeners did not seem to like. "I'm going to offer you a choice of courses. You can either persist in the statement you have just now made—in which case it will become a matter for the police—or you will exhibit for my inspection the whole contents of this room, and I will take away with me such papers as it is quite clear you must have stolen from Creed in the first instance, and in the second instance—what is much more important—from me. I will give you a minute to make up your mind which of these courses you will select; in the event of your choosing neither, I will offer you a third alternative. If you prefer it, I will take the law into my own hands, treat you both to a thrashing, drop you, if necessary, out of the window, and find out, without your assistance, what stolen property of mine you have in your possession. To begin with, I want the bill of sale on The Dovecote."

Some of Mr. Issachar's courage had evaporated again, as his tone showed.

"You—you really aren't treating us fairly, Mr. Adair—you really aren't. But if you'll allow me to say a few words to my partner in private I'll see what we can do."

"Everything you have to say to Daniel, or Daniel has to say to you, you'll say out loud, where you are. Be quick, please! I want that bill of sale on The Dovecote."

Mr. Daniel tried to thrust himself into the breach. "Let me explain, Mr. Adair—you really must! You know we're a lot of money out of pocket. Mr. Creed owed us no end——"

"Hand over that bill of sale, you thief! and liar!"

"You mustn't use such language to us, Mr. Adair; you—you mustn't do it. We're simply men of business with wives and families——"

"If you have any claims against Creed's estate—which I don't believe—send them in to Mr. Foster. They shall receive all the attention they deserve, and more. Don't you try to confuse the issues; you are a couple of thieves, and liars, and bullies, and cowards. Now, as the auctioneer says, for the last time, are you going to hand me over that bill of sale?"

Mr. Issachar still tried to expostulate.

"If you'll only have a moment's patience, Mr. Adair—— Mr. Adair!"

Before the lawyer could complete his sentence, the visitor, coming round the table, had swept him and his chair away, and was opening the drawer in the table in front of which he had been sitting.

"I warned you, Issachar now I'm going to look for myself."

Adair was dealing with the contents of the drawer with a freedom which pained the partners.

"Here, Mr. Adair!" cried Mr. Daniel. "We're not going to stand this. Those are our private papers, they're not yours. Issachar, you had better ring that bell."

"Yes, Issachar, you ring it! We shall want the police, no doubt, before we've done. I recognise a good many of these papers. You seem to have been stealing on a wholesale scale. I wonder how many people you have been treating as you have Miss Dennis—trying to get money out of them by means of threats, on the strength of documents which you have stolen!"

Mr. Daniel, who was a little, thin man, just over five feet in height, made a sudden vicious dash at Adair, who brushed him aside with so much vigour that he went toppling to the floor. "Sorry if I've hurt you, Daniel; but if I have to drop you from the window it will hurt still more. Quite two-thirds of these papers are my property, you pretty rogues!"

Although his language was strong, Mr. Adair's manner was still urbane. He continued to examine the contents of the drawer, which he had now taken out of the table, with a thoroughness which at last brought at least Mr. Issachar to a point at which he realised how much the visitor was in earnest.

"Look here, Mr. Adair, I'll make a clean breast of it. We have got some of Mr. Creed's papers, so there!"

"I can see you have. What you don't seem to realise is that they are mine."

"We did a lot of work for Mr. Creed, and we always gave him satisfaction. He was our chief client. When he died in that unexpected way he

rather left us stranded. We were handling a lot of things for him at the very time. He did owe us a good deal of money—I can show you the accounts. There was no one in Mitre Court to represent him; no one knew who was the heir, or what was to become of the business and property; no one knew anything. So we just went on, Daniel and I, very much as we had been in the habit of doing, representing his interests, dealing with matters just as he would have instructed us to do if he had been still alive. Then you come along—the heir to everything—and you kick us out. We were doing no harm, we were just doing what Creed himself would have done, and we were hurt by your treatment of us. There was no staff in Mitre Court, so we had some of the papers brought here for convenience in dealing with them. If you had approached us properly, we should have laid everything before you. But you didn't. From one or two words you let drop, and from one or two things which had got about, we gathered that you meant to let Mr. Creed's business go to pot, and not trouble about any of the people who owed him money. Under the circumstances, considering what he owed us, I don't think we're very much to blame for having looked after ourselves. And that's the whole truth, and now you've got it. You can have the papers which belong to the estate—we never said you couldn't—and we'll render you an account of what Mr. Creed owed us, and perhaps you'll see it settled."

"Mr. Foster will see that everything is settled which is owing. As you say, you do seem to have a few papers of mine. I'm beginning to wonder if there's anything in the room which isn't mine."

Mr. Daniel had got up from the floor and was rubbing his elbow.

"Tell Mr. Adair, Issachar, that we'll make him an offer for Creed's business—a fair offer, based upon a proper valuation."

"Does that mean, Daniel, that you'd carry the business on if you had the chance?"

"Certainly, if you'd let us have it at a fair price. It is not a bad business, and one which we could handle nicely."

"I daresay; but you won't have the chance. Jerningham Creed was probably as great a thief as you are—possibly even greater: he made more money. I've not yet made up my mind what I am going to do with his ill-gotten gains, which, for some inscrutable reason, he passed on to me; but on this I am resolved, that his usurious business shall cease. All his present debtors shall be forgiven their debts."

Mr. Daniel could restrain himself no longer; he had to interrupt.

"Good heavens! Issachar, did you ever hear anything like that?"

Martin Adair quietly continued:

"Investigations shall be set on foot into the affairs of those who have been his debtors, and those who have suffered wrongs at his hands shall, to the best of my ability, have their wrongs redressed. That being the case, you'll easily understand that the business is not for sale, and that I am unable to accept even the fairest offer you can make. I'll have nothing to do with usury, or with the fruits of usury, if I can help it; that's a solid and a simple fact."

CHAPTER VIII.

REPRESENTING A SYNDICATE.

FROM Messrs. Issachar and Damel, Mr. Adair went to Mitre Court. On the oak door which guarded the entrance to the chambers of the late Mr. Jerningham Creed was the sheet of cartridge paper which Mr. Adair had himself affixed; he had not been to Mitre Court since he had placed it there. Across the legend inscribed upon it: "Out for the day—Business suspended—Call again," someone had written in red chalk with bold characters, "Rot!" while someone else had pencilled in the corner, "I've called ten times with the money in my pocket; now I'll keep it.—James May." As he read, Mr. Adair seemed tickled.

"The word 'rot' is tersely descriptive, and Mr. James May seems to be a persevering sort of man. After calling ten times he certainly seems entitled to keep his money."

Mr. Adair uttered his comment aloud. As he put the key into the lock, he said something to himself.

"It's very odd, but the feeling is back again that Jerningham Creed is waiting for me inside." As he hesitated, he listened. "If that's not his voice! Surely somebody's inside the room."

He swung back the heavy oaken door. The door beyond, which, of course, was the one in ordinary use, was closed. He seemed puzzled.

"What possesses me directly I come here? There can be nobody inside, and yet I thought I heard someone."

Fitting a key into the lock of the second door, he threw that back, stared for a moment at what was beyond, then passed the portal.

"My word! What an odour! It's like a vault! Earthly, like a tomb."

Throwing up the windows, he looked about him.

"What an abode of desolation, and dust, and dirt, and cobwebs. Something will certainly have to be done to make these rooms presentable. The sooner I put things in order, the better. I don't know what it is that has prevented me doing it before, but certainly something has. I've a feeling that there's something about this place which isn't good for anyone—especially for me."

His attention was caught by a heap of postal packets which lay upon the floor.

"What a crowd of letters! I wonder if any of them require answering. I ought to attend to something—or someone ought. I'll have Foster in. He shall put the place in order; then out I'll go."

Picking up the letters, he threw them on to the great, old, leather writing-table, which was in the centre of the room, heedless of the clouds of dust which arose as they fell. He examined some of the envelopes.

"It would only be decent to look what's in some of these things. Let's begin with this."

Tearing open an envelope, he took out a sheet of paper on which were some typewritten words:

"A word of warning. You've got what isn't yours. Hand over, and clear out, lest evil befall you. There are worse things than sleeping out on the Embankment, as you know. To the sneak thief who calls himself Martin Adair.—From a Friend."

"So that's what is in envelope number one, is it? We've begun with it, and I think we'll end with it. I'm not at all interested to know what the rest of these missives are about. I've sampled enough."

He tore the sheet of paper into fragments, which he dropped upon the floor, then trod them under foot.

"What would Miss Winifred Dennis say if she read that friendly warning? She haunts this place almost as much as Creed himself. It was just after a quarter past two that Wednesday morning that she came down the stairs from this room. I had heard Big Ben striking the quarter just before—the wind was coming from that way. I wonder if she saw me. She took no notice of me if she did—no particular notice, that is. I am certain she never recognised me. Her face seemed to burn itself upon my brain. There was something on it which I didn't like at all. What was she doing here—at a quarter past two—that Tuesday morning? Shall I ever have courage enough to ask her? I wonder!"

He gave himself a little twist, as if he were shaking something off him.

"I'm going to look into this and make sure. Jerningham Creed is not going to haunt me all my life. In the first place I'm going to make out why he left me all his money. There was a reason—I'm sure there was a reason—he was not the sort of man

to do anything without a reason. I'm going to find out what that reason was. I take it that the explanation is somewhere in these chambers. That's why I'm so reluctant to let Foster, or anyone else, come meddling, until I've found it. When I have I'll have a bonfire made of everything that's in the place; it shall be made clean and sweet smelling. The point is, where am I to begin to look? I'll work backwards, and begin with his private apartments. I've a sort of feeling that I shall find the reason there—in his bedroom, perhaps. That's what I'll begin with."

The bedroom proved to be in a state of the greatest disorder. Jerningham Creed had been done to death somewhere in the small hours of the morning. The theory was that he had heard someone in the office without, and had got out of bed to see who was there. The bed had never been re-made. The bedclothes were thrown back, just as he had left them in his hurried rising. Mr. Adair threw up the windows as far as they would go—the air was fetid.

"This room will take some searching—two safes, strong boxes, cupboards. The man probably kept all his secrets hidden here. It may be a storehouse of hidden mysteries. I'll begin with this cupboard."

He had a big bunch of keys in his hand. After trying several, he found one which fitted the tiny keyhole. After a little manipulation the door swung noiselessly open.

"Lined with sheet iron, if the whole door isn't iron. There ought to be something worth looking at in here."

There were a number of shelves divided into partitions of different sizes. In each, exactly

fitting it, was a metal box. Mr. Adair saw them in amazement.

"There must be two dozen at the least, probably more. They can't all be full of papers."

When he tried to take one out, he found that it would not move.

"There's something queer about this. Are they fastened in? Aren't they made to come out? What are those little bosses?"

At the corner of each partition there was a sort of excrescence, as if they were all studded with tenpenny nails, which had been painted over with the rest of the woodwork.

"I wonder——" The rest of the sentence was not expressed in words, but in action. Putting his thumb against one of these bosses, he pushed. It yielded: the metal case below came out of the partition a sufficient distance to enable Adair to grasp it. A moment after he had it in his hand.

"Now we don't seem to be any better off. The thing appears to have no lock and no lid; I presume it has an inside, but—how to reach it? Jerningham Creed was a more remarkable person even than I supposed. This cupboard and its contents must have represented considerable thought and much money."

He shook the case. It seemed to be made of steel, painted brown, with a depth of perhaps six inches; as regards length and breadth, it was about eighteen inches square. When Adair shook it, something was audible within, something which rattled.

"That's not papers; it can't be money. A man like Creed wouldn't be such a fool as to hoard up money which brought him no interest. I'm going

to get into this box if I have to break it open with the poker."

He had not to resort to quite such a drastic measure. Turning the box over and over, and round and round, he could find nothing which suggested that there was any way in. He was just deciding that he would have to break it open when, slipping from his hands, in falling one corner of it struck against the floor. When he picked it up it was open; apparently some hidden spring had been set in motion by contact with the floor. He raised the lid. On the top was a thick layer of cotton-wool. Quite what the contents of the box were which its removal disclosed he was for a moment at a loss to determine.

"It looks like odds and ends from a pawnbroker's window. What are they—scraps of jewellery?" He took something out. "That looks like an ornament for a woman's hair. Is it paste, or diamonds? It can't be diamonds. If they were —it would be worth quite a lot of money; yet, if they're not, I don't know diamonds when I see them. Another hair ornament—another—and another; I'm inclined to think that those are diamonds in each of them. If that is the case, then in this box there must be one of the finest collections of diamond ornaments for the hair in town. I didn't know Creed dealt in precious stones; how came he to be possessed of all these things? Hallo, there's something which is not an ornament for the hair—a cross: a Maltese cross. Diamonds again—those are diamonds! That's something rather unusual in crosses. It's odd, but I seem to have seen one just like it before. It recalls one my mother had."

Turning the cross over, he closely eyed the gold setting at the back. An exclamation broke from his lips.

"It's my mother's cross! There's the crest and the initials, just as I remember them. How came my mother's diamond cross to be in Creed's possession?"

He took out a diamond star and examined the obverse.

"My mother's again—crest and initials both! I've been living in a fog for some time, but this is beyond anything. There's piece after piece here of my mother's jewellery. They weren't her personal property, they were heirlooms—I have good reason to know that."

As he was still subjecting the contents of the box to the closest examination, without the slightest warning he leapt to one side, just in time to avoid something which whizzed through the air, and would have alighted on his head had he remained in his former position. A singular-looking person had approached on noiseless feet from the rear, and had not some instinct warned him, would have stunned him with some weapon in the nature of a sand-bag. Although taken so wholly unawares, Mr. Adair's self-possession never left him for a moment. As his assailant was making ready to strike again, he seized his wrist, wrenched his weapon from him and would have taken him by the throat. But with a swift, wriggling, snake-like motion, the man slipped out of his reach, swung round, and made off for his life. He was already at the door before Mr. Adair quite realised that he had failed to grip him. Although he moved as fast as he could, when

he reached the office he was only just in time to catch sight of the fugitive flying through the other door. As he was rushing out, Mr. Adair all but cannoned into someone who was coming in.

"Hallo, hallo!" exclaimed a genial voice. "May I ask if you always come out of a room like this, because, if so, sir, you ought to sound a horn, or do something to let folks know that you're coming."

"As you came up the stairs," inquired Adair, "did you meet a blackguard running down?"

The stranger's reply was perhaps unexpected.

"How should I have known he was a blackguard if I had? Was it on a plate in front of him? As it happens, I met no one on the stairs, but as I was coming in from the street someone came out who seemed to be in rather a hurry. It struck me that he was a Chinaman."

"A Chinaman, was he? I thought he was something of that kind, the pretty creature!"

"You seem agitated, sir. What is that you have in your hand?"

"This looks to me like a strip of old canvas, with a wad at the end, probably of sand. In other words, this is what I believe in a certain section of society is technically known as a sand-bag. If it hadn't been that some instinct warned me, your Chinese friend would have laid me out with this."

"Pray don't speak of him as my friend, sir. I trust I have no friends of his stamp. I'm afraid I have come at rather an inopportune moment, but allow me to introduce myself. I am Maximilian Outerbridge—a name, I fancy, which is not unknown to you."

"Outerbridge!" Martin Adair eyed the stranger.

"I fancy, sir, you are wrong, because I do not remember to have heard it before, nor to have seen you."

"You must know the name if only because of the letters I have been sending you, to which, by the way, you have returned no answer, which is one reason why I am here. I take it you are Mr. Adair?"

"Oh, yes, I am Mr. Adair. So you've been sending me letters! To what address?"

"To this. I gathered that you were the present tenant of these chambers."

"If you sent them to me at this address I think it is possible that they're among that heap on the table. I haven't been so regular in my attendance as I might have been. Letters have accumulated. What can I do for you, Mr. Outerbridge? I'm rather engaged just now, so if you'll come to the point in as few words as you can manage, I'll be grateful."

The stranger was probably nearly six feet high himself. He was much broader than Adair; in the scales he would have weighed him down. He was a man of about forty, not bad-looking, with blue eyes, and a little, pointed, flaxen beard; not badly dressed, in a becoming suit of light brown tweeds. The two men regarded each other as if each was trying to make out what sort of person the other was, and not altogether succeeding.

"I'll be brief enough; have you got somewhere where I can sit, Mr. Adair? I can always talk better when I'm sitting down. Your chairs look as if they were covered with the dust of ages, and your table is worse. Here, I've got a paper—I'll sit on that."

Mr. Outerbridge placed himself on a sheet of newspaper, which he spread out on a corner of the writing-table.

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Adair? I like the man I'm talking to to sit down also, if he will."

"Thank you, Mr. Outerbridge. I think I'd rather stand. What can I do for you?"

"You're the heir to the late Mr. Jerningham Creed. I was in Constantinople when I heard of his unhappy end, and I at once wrote off to London to make inquiries."

"About what? To whom did you address your letter?"

"I addressed my letter to the representative of the late Jerningham Creed, Esquire. I think, in view of what you said just now, if you will allow me to glance through this pile of correspondence, I may be able to find the letter, as well as others."

"I shall be obliged, Mr. Outerbridge, if you will leave those letters alone. Thank you. What was in your communication, Mr. Outerbridge? What had you to do with the late Mr. Jerningham Creed?"

"I had a great deal to do with him, Mr. Adair, both in my private capacity and also as the representative of a syndicate. I did a great deal of business with Mr. Creed—sometimes to the extent of a hundred thousand pounds a year."

"That seems a large figure. I didn't know that Mr. Creed did business on quite that scale."

"Probably not. I fancy you knew very little about Mr. Creed, or his affairs. I'm told that you only made his acquaintance a comparatively short time ago, and that you were a sort of junior clerk in his office. I don't mean to be offensive,

Mr. Adair: I'm just repeating to you what I have been told. Did he leave you everything?"

"He did—every stick and stone of which he died possessed."

"Is that so? I don't know whether to call you fortunate or unfortunate, Mr. Adair. Perhaps you have already discovered that to be Mr. Jerningham Creed's sole residuary legatee is not all lavender. It isn't all joy to be the heir of a man like he was. That little incident with the gentleman you were following in such a hurry when I came in suggests it."

"You haven't yet told me what you want with me, Mr. Outerbridge. I hope I have made it clear to you that my time is valuable."

"So is mine, Mr. Adair, so is mine. In one sentence, what I want from you, as the late Mr. Jerningham Creed's sole legal representative, is one hundred thousand pounds, more or less, for which sum Mr. Creed was indebted to me."

"Do you mean that, Mr. Outerbridge? Are you serious?"

"Never was more serious in my life, Mr. Adair."

"You can prove what you say?"

"You mean in a court of law? Well, that's it; that's just it, Mr. Adair. I fancy you know that's it."

"I know absolutely nothing, Mr. Outerbridge."

The stranger's blue eyes had scarcely left Mr. Adair's face since he had come into the room. Before he answered he regarded him with a long and curious scrutiny.

"Is that the position you're going to take up, Mr. Adair? I hope not—for all our sakes."

"I don't in the least know what you mean, sir;

you may believe that, Mr. Outerbridge. As you said, I knew very little about Mr. Creed, and the more I look into his affairs, the less I find I know."

"Have you gone through—his little store, Mr. Adair?"

"I have not. I have gone through nothing."

"When are you going to start?"

"I can't tell you. I'm in no hurry; I'm content to take things leisurely."

"That may suit you, Mr. Adair, but it doesn't me. I represent a syndicate, and that syndicate is in a hurry."

"What do you call a syndicate, Mr. Outerbridge?"

"A syndicate in this case consists of a number of gentlemen interested in the same business. One moment, Mr. Adair—let me go on. This syndicate, as I remarked, has been doing business with Mr. Creed for a good many years. A few days before he died, I, acting on his behalf, consigned to him a parcel which contained some extremely valuable trifles."

"They were the property of the—syndicate?"

"Yes, Mr. Adair, they were the property of the syndicate."

"Honestly come by, Mr. Outerbridge?"

"In what sense do you ask that question?"

"I ask it as a plain man, Mr. Outerbridge. You seem to find it rather a delicate question to answer. You say you consigned a parcel to Mr. Creed—what exactly did it contain? Can you give me details?"

"Of course I can give you details—exact details If I give you these details, will you return me the contents of the parcel? You understand they're not your property—since Mr. Creed never paid for them?

I have not the slightest doubt that he would have paid for them, but he hadn't time."

"Tell me what were the contents of the parcel, Mr. Outerbridge. Give me, anyhow, some idea."

"Will you return the goods to me if I do?"

"Have you an acknowledgment from Mr. Creed of the receipt of this parcel?"

"I have what is as good. It was registered. It was delivered to Mr. Creed by the postal authorities, and they hold his receipt. What is the matter with you, Mr. Adair? Why do you hesitate? Do you think I am telling you a lie? Surely you're not the sort—you're too good a sportsman—to take advantage of what happened to poor old Creed to do a number of hard-working men out of what I am ready to make perfectly clear does not belong to you?"

"You possibly intend, Mr. Outerbridge, to pay me a compliment, for which I thank you. But you hardly present the matter from the point of view from which it appears to me. There was something funny about Mr. Creed; I knew that all along; but I'm only just beginning to discover how funny. In fact, to be frank, I only began my discoveries just before you came into the room. Clearly you know a great deal more about him than I do."

"That is possible, since you pretend to know nothing."

"In what business are you engaged, Mr. Outerbridge?"

"I'm a dealer."

"A dealer in what?"

"Look here, Mr. Adair. Do let's begin to understand each other. Are you going to pay the sum

which I shall be pleased to make clear to your commercial brain is owing, or are you going to return the goods? In the latter event, I should like them now, before I leave this room."

"I will certainly hand you over nothing, either cash, or what you call goods, before you leave this room. I am going to have matters thoroughly looked into. I have no doubt that Mr. Creed had a record of his correspondents; a communication will be sent to each of them. If they have any claim against the estate, they will be requested to make it; that is merely the ordinary way of doing things, as you are aware. Leave me your address; such a communication shall be sent to you; anything you may say will receive the most careful consideration —and I give you my word that justice shall be done."

"I'm afraid that that won't quite do. The men I represent want their money—now; and they're going to have it, or the goods—to-day. Be a reasonable man; don't make trouble. Give me your word that if I establish the fact to your satisfaction that such and such things were sent to Mr. Creed on a certain day, which, owing to what happened to him, were not paid for, cash shall be handed over, or the articles returned, and I'll tell you the whole story so plainly that I'll guarantee that you'll understand the business as well as I do. Give me your word, I say, and I'll start right now. Now, Mr. Adair, be a decent sort —you've seen some funny times yourself, and some funny things—and give me your word."

There was a considerable pause before Mr. Adair spoke. It was odd how both men continued to eye each other, and how both smiled—and what a different quality there was in their smiles.

"Suppose, for argument's sake—I'm only putting the case for the sake of argument—that the syndicate which you say you represent had consigned certain property, valuable property, to Mr. Creed, which—we'll put it—wasn't theirs; if you were in my position you wouldn't return it to them, would you, sir? I'm sure you wouldn't; you're not that kind of man—you're too much of a sportsman."

"You know more than you pretend—that fact is gradually dawning on me."

"Yes; in what sense is that meant?"

"You convey the information not only by the things you say, and the way in which you say them, but also by something which is in your eyes, on your face, in your whole attitude, Mr. Adair. You know that you have no right to what Mr. Jerningham Creed, in one of his more humorous moments, left you—if only because, by the standard of an English court of law, to what he has left he had no right either."

"Is that so? Now we're getting out into the open, Mr. Outerbridge. You appear to be a gentleman of such keen intuition that I need not tell you that you are putting my suspicions into words."

"Your suspicions?"

"My suspicions; are you hinting that they have been more than suspicions, that they amounted to exact knowledge?"

"Not at all. You're one of those men to whom I should be unwilling to hint anything they would rather I didn't. I don't like to use such words as hypocrite, and humbug, and others of that kind; so I'll just say that you're a clever man. And I hope you're clever enough to understand that I'm

saying only what I mean when I tell you that the gentlemen I represent want these goods—their goods to-day, now, before I leave this room. I have here a little document which will give you full particulars of our side of the deal, with an exact description of the articles sent, the price at which they were valued —a valuation, mind you, accepted by the late Mr. Jerningham Creed—and other interesting items which you may find it worth your while to glance through."

Mr. Outerbridge had taken some papers from his breast pocket—was unfolding and offering them to Mr. Adair, who stood a foot or two in front of him as he sat perched upon the corner of the table. Mr. Adair had made a half-step forward, so as to get within reach of the proffered papers, when he swung suddenly round, just in time to see the door open noiselessly, and a square-faced man, with yellow skin and slits for eye-holes, slip swiftly and stealthily into the room. No sooner was he in than a lean brown hand, appearing round the side of the door, suggested that someone else was close behind. Before there was time to see what belonged to the hand, Mr. Adair had crossed the room, caught the square-faced man by the neck, torn the door open, flung him out, shut the door with a bang, and slipped the bolt. He stood for a moment or two listening, then he turned to Mr. Outerbridge.

"Those, I presume, are some of the gentlemen you represent; there seem to be several on the landing. Do you imagine that, in that sort of way, you can get what I don't choose that you shall have?"

Mr. Outerbridge had remained immovable on the

corner of the table; during the little scene which had just been enacted in front of him not the slightest change had taken place in his demeanour; he spoke now in the same easy, genial tone of voice.

"You take things a good deal for granted, Mr. Adair. You assisted that gentleman out of the room very neatly indeed. The inference would seem to be that he's a friend of yours; if he isn't, why should you conclude that he's an acquaintance of mine? Go slow, sir, go slow. Now, would you just like to run your eye—since the little interlude is comfortably finished—over these one or two little papers of mine?"

There were two windows in the room, broad, old-fashioned ones. The panes of glass were almost wholly obscured by dirt. The sashes were thrown up as far as they would go. Instead of acknowledging the visitor's invitation to look at what he called his one or two little papers, Mr. Adair made a dash at one of these open sashes. He got there just in time to seize a yellow wrist which was attached to a hand, the long fingers of which had suddenly gripped the sill. He slightly jerked the wrist—the finger and the hand disappeared. He brought down the sash with a run, fastened it with a catch, and, without an instant's pause, passed to the window beyond, over the bottom of which a human head was rising. He struck the face, when it came in sight, such a blow with his clenched fist that it vanished much quicker than it had appeared. He closed that window; then again he turned to Mr. Outerbridge, who, still imperturbable, seemed to play the part of an indifferent spectator.

"What a remarkable sort of fool you and your

friends must take me for. Do you think any of them are likely to try to effect an entry down the chimney ? "

" Gently repudiating your suggestion that they're friends of mine, I really couldn't say. They appear to be persevering persons."

" They can persevere, Mr. Outerbridge, but they may find that there are occasions on which perseverance is vain."

" I think not—I really think not. Better be wise and give them what is their own."

" The way in which they, and you, are trying to get it makes it clear that it isn't their own. However, sir, I don't wish to enter into all that again. I wish you good-day."

The visitor shook his head, as one shakes one's head at a foolish child, with a twinkle in his eye.

" You're talking of what you don't understand, Mr. Adair. You'll have a swarm of wasps about you before you're very much older. You're trying to take their nest, and under those circumstances wasps sting. Now, be sensible, Mr. Adair, hear reason."

" Which is it to be—the door or the window ? "

Mr. Outerbridge eyed the speaker quizzically, then again he shook his head ; he even sighed, as if troubled for the other's sake.

" Not the window—no, I'd rather not. If I must choose I prefer the door ; I've never left a room by means of a window yet." The speaker descended from his corner of the table on to the floor.

" Honestly, my dear friend—if you'll permit me to call you my friend——"

"I'd rather you didn't; I don't want you to insult me."

"Humorous, always humorous, and humour is such a gift. I was about to ask you, my dear enemy, before I leave the room—by the door—to listen to a word of wisdom; this may be the only chance you'll ever have. If you don't—later you'll be sorry."

"Then I'll be sorry." Adair was standing close to the door. "If your friends are without, waiting to try a rush when I open the door for you, as I fancy may be the case, you favour them with a word of wisdom; recommend them to do nothing of the kind. They'll be sorry if they do. Now, sir, stand just there, and the instant the door is opened—go out; or—you'll be sorry."

"Is this the exact position you wish me to occupy, Mr. Adair? Make it clear to the fraction of an inch."

"That will do. Now."

Adair slipped back the bolt, allowing the door to open perhaps eighteen inches, shot the visitor through it, closed the door again, and made fast the bolt. He listened.

"They were outside; they're there now. Is he bestowing on them his words of wisdom?"

CHAPTER IX.

THE BROOCH.

AS Mr. Adair that evening strolled up the lane towards what was, for the present, his home, he saw coming through the cottage gate a feminine figure—this time there was no doubt that the figure was feminine. At sight of him, being arrived within speaking distance, the owner of the figure stopped.

"You are Mr. Martin Adair?'

The gentleman addressed removed his hat. He was beyond the usual height of men, and the lady who put the question was under the average height of women. She wore so large a hat that she seemed lost beneath it; it was probably as many inches round as she was high. She had to tilt her head to look up at Mr. Adair—out of a rather impertinent pair of big, grey eyes. The gentleman admitted his name. The lady continued.

"I am Mrs. Bishop Guy—a silly name, isn't it? I certainly am not a bishop, though I may be a guy. Permit me to present you with my card." She took a piece of pasteboard out of the pink leather bag which she was carrying. "I'm a friend of

Winnie's; Winnie, as you probably know, is Miss Dennis. Miss Dennis has been telling me all about you; that is, she's been telling me a good deal about you. I've just been calling there, and as probably the oldest friend she has I should rather like to make your acquaintance, Mr. Adair. You'll find my address on that card. Let me know when you are coming, and I shall be sure to be in, and, if you can make it an evening I shall be happy to introduce you to my husband, Mr. Bishop Guy. May I—may we—anticipate the pleasure of seeing you?"

"I shall be very glad to call upon you, Mrs. Guy—I should say, Mrs. Bishop Guy—if you will be so good as to permit me."

"Oh, I'll permit you; I'll do more than permit you. I won't say I'll command you, but I will say that I wish you to come—at the earliest possible moment."

The little lady, inclining her head, passed on down the lane. The gentleman, slipping the bit of pasteboard into his waistcoat pocket, went on to The Dovecote. Miss Dennis opened the door for him, anxiety written large all over her. Before he had crossed the threshold she began on the subject which it was very evident occupied her mind.

"They haven't fetched away the furniture, not yet."

"Have you been worrying yourself about that?" He smiled at her. "After what I told you this morning? You seem to have had very little faith in my words, Miss Dennis."

She said nothing; she only put her hand to her side and drew a little back so as to let him pass.

"If you will come with me into the sitting-room

for a moment I think I have good news for you, Miss Dennis. Will you not sit down?"

No, she would not sit down—she did not say so, she merely shook her head. They were in the sitting-room. Noticing the strained look which was in her eyes, and how she trembled, he wasted no time in prefatory remarks. Taking some papers from his pocket, he placed them on the table.

"There, Miss Dennis, is your bill of sale; if you take my advice you'll tear it up and burn the pieces. There is a receipt in full for the amount which you erroneously suppose to be owing; there is a letter from Messrs. Issachar and Daniel, explaining that their communication of yesterday was written under an entire misapprehension, since they now find, not only that you owe nothing, but that they are actually in your debt. I believe they enclose the amount with which they credit you."

The girl looked at Mr. Adair. There was something in her pretty eyes which affected him most oddly; it was a look in which there was certainly suspicion, probably pain, possibly something which he could not diagnose. She said nothing; her silence was to him almost like an accusation. She took up the papers he had laid down; first the bill of sale, which she glanced at only superficially; then the receipt, which she stared at very hard; then the letter from Messrs. Issachar and Daniel, every word of which she seemed to read carefully twice or thrice; and finally the bank-notes. She took those up as if they were dangerous, as if she were afraid of them. Unfolding them, she examined each in turn, then slowly counted them to make sure how many there were. Having done so, she looked

up again at Mr. Adair, still with that queer something in her eyes. She laid the bank-notes on the table.

These performances of hers occupied a quite perceptible period of time. Mr. Adair, who had crossed to the other side of the room, observed them with what one felt was more interest than he cared to show, as if, for some cause, he was uneasy. There was no doubt about his uneasiness when once more he met the lady's eyes.

"Well," he asked, "what's wrong?"

One wondered if the question was meant to be humorous. Her manner was grave enough as she replied.

"What does this mean, Mr. Adair?"

"I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"This money has not been paid by me; I still owe it. How come you to be in a position to present me with this bill of sale, which was to serve as security for my debt? Who paid the money for which this is the receipt? Under what circumstances were Messrs. Issachar and Daniel induced to write this letter? It is a tissue of mis-statements. They were not under a misapprehension; I did owe the money; as to the idea that they owed me money, it is too ridiculous! I ask you, Mr. Adair, what all this means?"

"You're not willing to take the position for granted, Miss Dennis, without yards of explanation?"

"Have you paid this money?"

"Why shouldn't I—if I choose to make you my debtor?"

"Then it's you I owe the money to now. Is that what you mean?"

"If you prefer to put it in that way."

"Then the contents of the house are yours."

The gentleman seemed to be at a momentary loss for an answer. He would have liked to tell her straight out that they were nothing of the sort, that they were hers; but he dare not. There was a quality in the girl's attitude which deprived him of his courage. He tried to temporise.

"How am I to answer you, Miss Dennis? If you insist upon it, the contents of the house are mine."

"It is not a question of if; it's a question of fact." Her voice was cool, her manner a little hard. "Are the contents of this house yours, or whose are they, Mr. Adair? You surely realise that I must know where I stand."

"Of course." He turned ostensibly to place his cigar-case on the mantel, perhaps really to avoid her glance. "I trust you will find me a lenient creditor."

"But that's exactly what I don't want." He turned again to stare, there was a ring in her voice. "I don't want leniency; I want nothing to which I am not entitled. You must allow me to say, Mr. Adair, that most certainly I do not want a favour from you."

"You place me in an embarrassing position, Miss Dennis. Would you mind telling me exactly what you do want?"

Something flamed in her eyes.

"It doesn't matter." Putting up her hand she brushed something away. "What does it matter what I want! I quite realise that I am helpless; that since I can't pay I must owe someone. And since you, as you kindly put it, are likely to be more lenient than those lawyers, it may as well be you.

But I can tell you this, Mr. Adair, that I'm going to pay that money to the uttermost farthing. I don't know how, and I don't know when, but if I live it shall be paid. As for these "—she picked up the bank-notes—" I'm wondering if you meant them as a dole. I ought to be grateful if you did, but—I'm not! Because I keep a lodging-house that is no reason why I should receive presents from my lodgers."

She stopped; he was speechless; the girl positively made him feel ashamed. Presently she went on, speaking with an evident effort to seem indifferent.

" I'm afraid I'm wasting my time, Mr. Adair, and yours. I ought to be getting your dinner ready. Should it be a few minutes late I shall have to ask you to excuse me."

She went out of the room, and he stood staring at the door which she had closed behind her.

" Of all the remarkable young women! Was there ever a man who thought he understood a creature of the opposite sex? I should like to introduce him to Miss Winifred Dennis. I had no idea, until I entered this room—dunderhead that I was!—that from her point of view I was taking a liberty in doing as I have done. She has made it perfectly clear now. Of course I had no right to pay the money she owed; and, as a mere lodger of a few weeks' standing, I had still less right to make her a present of what, to her, is a large sum of money. Very well; I'll be her creditor; I'll hold the bill of sale on the contents of The Dovecote; the chairs and tables, the pots and pans, the beds and earthenware; though what I'm going to do if she ever should offer to pay is beyond me altogether."

As he was about to gather up the papers which the lady had left behind her, his attention was caught by something which lay among them on the tablecloth.

"What's that? Isn't it the brooch she was wearing? It must have got loose and fallen without her noticing it." He took it up. "It's extremely absurd, but are there visions about that I should seem to fancy I have seen so many things before? My mother had a brooch like this; it's again my mother! I remember it quite well. It was a peridot, I think one of the finest specimens I ever saw. I remember my mother telling me that a peridot was one of the gems in the breastplate worn by the Jewish High Priest. Set in the centre of the stone itself, in my mother's, just as is the case with this, was a pearl. You pressed it and the back flew open; why, so does this. How very odd! In the back of my mother's brooch was a miniature of my father; and, as I'm his son, there it is!"

By way of illustrating his words he had pressed the pearl, the back had come away, and there, in front of him, was a masculine face, which somehow, even in that tiny miniature, suggested his own.

"I seem to have wandered into a world of coincidences. Finding my mother's jewels in that case in Creed's bedroom was strange enough, but to find that Miss Winifred Dennis has been wearing my mother's brooch seems to me to be a good deal stranger. By what amazing, incredible chain of circumstances can it have strayed into her possession?"

He was still staring at the brooch when the door re-opened. As if unwittingly he slipped the hand which held the brooch into his jacket pocket. Miss

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Dennis came into the room. In her demeanour there was a subtle change, as if her pride had had a fall. Her voice was meekness itself.

"Mr. Adair, I was very horrid to you just now; I have come away from cooking your dinner to tell you so. I quite realise that you meant to be kind, and that you were kind; quite frankly, I don't know what I should have done without you. I was in despair's last ditch when first you knocked at the door and asked to see the rooms. Before this my mother and I would have been without a roof over our heads if it had not been for you. And—and now you've paid those horrid people what I owed them. I believe you meant to make me a present of the money."

[redacted] did, I certainly did. I tell you that quite candidly, Miss Dennis. My point of view was this. I'm quite comfortable here, I couldn't be more so, which isn't strange, since you do everything you can for my comfort. I want to remain. It didn't seem to me to be a bad speculation, since I have, so to speak, a lot of loose money lying idle, to use some of it for the purpose of making my position here secure. You can't very well turn me out, you know, if—if I've done my best to get you out of a rather unpleasant hole. That, I say, is my point of view, and it seems to me, Miss Dennis, to be quite a sound one."

"You are rather Jesuitical, Mr. Adair, or should I say diplomatic? But your phrases don't hide from me the fact that your intention was to do me a very great service. I won't ask you why just now, because I ought to be cooking your dinner, but afterwards I—I should like some sort of explanation,

Mr. Adair. I felt that I had to come in to tell you how conscious I was that I had been horrid."

She was out of the room again before he could stop her, leaving him, if anything, in a rather more confused state of mind than before.

"Now, what is she driving at, that remarkable young woman? Are the contents of the house hers, or are they mine? Is she my debtor, and am I to play the part of a relentless creditor or—or what part am I to play? She said nothing about the brooch, which is the most curious part of the whole curious business."

Withdraw ingthe hand which contained it from his jacket pocket, he examined it again, more minutely even than before.

"There are my mother's initials at the back and the crest. Their presence would settle the question of the original ownership if there was nothing else. I must try to think this thing out. What became of my mother's jewels I'm afraid I'm not in a position to say; it's possible that they went with the rest of the things. Everything was sold, and since some of them were worth a great deal of money there is no reason why they should have been spared, except that a good many of them were family heirlooms, in which case they ought to have gone on to Louisa. Did we rob her of those as well as everything else? With what holy thoughts she must think of us! We could not have stripped her more efficaciously had we been a band of brigands. And I did my share of the plundering better than any one else."

His thoughts had left the brooch and wandered afield. Now he brought them back to it, turning it over and over between his great fingers, as if by dint

of scrutiny he could find a key to the thing which puzzled him.

"I can understand how the jewels got to Creed; it was his business to advance money on anything; they may have stood to him as security for money lent; but Winifred Dennis? I can conceive of no possible explanation of how she came to be in possession of my mother's brooch. She doesn't seem to have missed it. When she does I wonder if I shall have the courage to ask how it came into her hands? I have not been afraid of many things or of many people—I say it with all due modesty—but it's a truly singular fact that I am afraid of her. It really is extraordinary, considering that she's nothing but a girl. If she were a grown woman there might be some excuse—but a girl!"

CHAPTER X.

A PUZZLE.

THAT evening Mr. Adair's dinner consisted of a grilled sole and a roast chicken, both excellent of their kind. He ate them with rather a sheepish air. Although he was hungry, and the food was so good, he was obsessed by the feeling that the cook was Miss Dennis. Relations between them had reached such a point that the consciousness of this fact filled him with a sense of vague discomfort. Then she did the waiting—that worried him still more. She flitted in and out of the room rapidly, noiselessly, whisking things away, replacing them with others, with a dexterity which struck him as remarkable. He was inwardly commenting on it all the while. He wondered how many things she was doing at once. She brought in a dish, took another out, returned to her cooking, dished up the food—and did it all without the slightest hitch. When did she eat, herself? and her mother? He supposed they did eat, sometimes. When he had taken his fill, and was disposed to look out on the world through rose-tinted glasses, then her real work began—the worst

part of it. She had to wash up the plates and dishes, and perform goodness only knew what other menial tasks besides—for him. If he only had the courage to suggest to her that she should keep a servant.

There was a moment when he almost had the courage. When she was removing the crumbs from the tablecloth with a brass scoop, she observed, "I'm afraid that chicken was overdone; I left it a little too long."

"Overdone?" he echoed her word. "Miss Dennis, I thought how perfectly it was cooked. I do not remember to have enjoyed a chicken more."

She glanced at him almost roguishly as she placed the crumb scoop on the tray.

"It's very nice to have a person like you in the house, Mr. Adair."

"That's good hearing."

"You are so easily pleased. You must know how things ought to be done, and how far I fall short of any decent standard, yet you pretend that I'm a paragon. You never complain, no matter what a mess I make of a thing, you always praise it. As I said, it is very nice to have a person like you in the house, but—sometimes I rather wish that you were a little more sincere."

"Sincere? Where you are concerned, to the best of my knowledge and belief, I've been the soul of sincerity from the first moment I saw you until now."

"Why couldn't you say then that the chicken was overdone—when it was dried almost to a cinder?"

"I believe that on the subject of underdone and overdone tastes differ."

She interrupted him. "I know what you're going to say." Removing the tablecloth, she began to fold it up. He interposed.

"I wish you'd let me help you to do that. Folding that great tablecloth is too much for one person, it fidgets me to watch you doing it."

She looked at him over the edge.

"I'm sorry to hear that it fidgets you; I had no idea it did that. Henceforward I will fold it up outside." She prepared to depart with the folded tablecloth over her arm; then something suddenly occurred to her. "By the way, did you notice if I left my brooch anywhere about the room?"

The fingers of one hand were at that moment fastened about the article to which she referred. He took it out of his pocket.

"You left it on the table when you went out of the room."

He held it out to her.

"Thank you. I was wondering where I had left it. I don't often wear a brooch, but I had a visitor this afternoon and I put it on in her honour."

Placing the brooch upon her tray, she was again about to leave the room when he stopped her.

"I don't wish to seem curious, and I assure you I have no intention to be impertinent, but may I ask where you got that brooch from?"

Turning, she looked at him as if with surprise.

"Someone gave it to me."

"Indeed? Still believe that I don't wish to pry into what does not concern me, but I can't help wondering how it came into the possession of the person who gave it to you."

The girl's face changed; the jaw seemed to grow

squarer, the expression harder, a glitter came into her eyes.

"Then I'm afraid I can't tell you. May I ask why you wonder? Is there anything about the brooch which is very remarkable?"

"Only that it was once my mother's."

For an instant or two it seemed that the girl failed to catch his meaning; then a flush came into her cheeks, only to die away.

"Mr. Adair? Do you really mean that this—this brooch of mine was once your mother's? How can you tell?"

"I doubt if it is so commonplace as you appear to imagine. The stone is a peridot or chrysolite, as perhaps you know."

"I didn't know; I wondered what it was."

"Didn't the person who gave it you tell you that it was?"

"No, he told me nothing."

"I believe you'll find that the peridot is an unusually fine example. The small stone in the centre is, of course, a pearl. Do you mind, Miss Dennis, taking the brooch in your hand, and pressing the pearl. Press it hard, with your thumb."

Putting the tray on the table she did as he requested. Suddenly she exclaimed, as if startled.

"Why, what's happened? The back has come open; there's a miniature inside of a man!"

"Miss Dennis, that man is my father. The miniature was done by Sir Thomas Lawrence, it was one of the few he did. I have always understood that my father gave it to my mother before they were married. When I was quite young I often remember seeing my mother wear it, although it was

already old-fashioned. It was always one of her most valued possessions. She remained very fond of my father till the day she died. So you see, Miss Dennis, it has a singular interest for me; which explains my anxiety to know how it came into the possession of the person who gave it to you. Is that a point on which you think you could get me information, or could you present me to the donor?"

The girl left the question unanswered. Her thoughts were apparently moving on lines of their own.

"Then if this was your mother's brooch perhaps it's yours. To whom did she leave it when she died?"

"I fear that is more than I can tell you. I am only wondering if the person who gave it to you could put me on the track of its history."

Was it his imagination, or had her lips blanched the life and colour faded from her face, what might have been a look of terror come into her eyes?

"Here is the brooch; it is clearly more yours than mine."

She put the brooch down on the table, speaking it seemed, with an effort. Taking up her tray once more she was about to depart when he stopped her.

"You misunderstand me, Miss Dennis. I have not the slightest intention of conveying the meaning you appear to suggest. The brooch is not mine, it never was; I have no title to it, either legal or moral. Please don't leave it on the table. Take it with you."

"Thank you, Mr. Adair, you're very good, or at least I suppose you intend to be very good; but after what you have said nothing will induce me to touch

that brooch again." Tray in hand, she paused at the open doorway. "It sounds very silly, but somehow I always felt that there was something about that brooch which I didn't like, which I was afraid of, but I couldn't imagine what it was; now I know. So far as I am concerned, you're perfectly welcome to your mother's brooch, Mr. Adair."

The girl had vanished; the door was closed. Mr. Adair had risen from his seat and stood staring at the brooch which she had left upon the table.

"This seems to be a pleasant atmosphere I'm living in, and she's a really remarkable girl. If she were my ——" He seemed to stop himself with a little jerk, as if confused; then substituted another form of words. "If I'd known her longer than I have, and had the honour to be on more intimate terms with her, I perhaps might induce her to behave more like a reasonable being. As it is——. Hang me, if I can't help feeling that there's some queer story about that brooch; the way she looked at me, the way she behaved, the way she left it behind, I can't help feeling that if she had chosen she could have thrown a good deal of light upon its history. She's upsetting me. I can bear a good deal in most ways, but she's getting on my nerves in a way I don't understand."

He thrust his fingers into his waistcoat pocket—some men have a trick of fidgeting with their fingers when they need a safety valve; when he withdrew them, in the fingers of his right hand was a piece of pasteboard. It was not his custom to change for dinner. He felt that if he were to sit down to the meal in a dinner jacket the fact that Winifred Dennis was his general servant would worry him still more;

so it chanced that he was still wearing the suit which he had had on when he encountered the little lady coming down the lane as he went up; the piece of pasteboard which he had discovered in his waistcoat pocket was the card she had given him. He glanced at it.

"Mrs. Bishop Guy? Who on earth——; oh, of course. She asked me to go and see her. What's the address? Redcliffe Mansions? That's off the Fulham Road, not so very far off. Why shouldn't I go and see her to-night, now? It isn't late. I can only find her out, or she can refuse to see me. I don't believe it's ordinary curiosity, I don't think I'm that sort of man; I've never had cause to suspect it; but I've reached a point at which, if I don't find out something from someone about Winifred Dennis and her mother, and The Dovecote generally —something will crack. I can't ask her, I simply can't. If I did she wouldn't answer. Yet it isn't as if I wanted to know anything which, in a sort of way, I'm not entitled to know; in an ordinary case I should get all the information I want from her, she'd volunteer it. The average woman—that's my experience—doesn't want to keep much about herself back from the average man. She's generally got some sort of a tale to tell. But this girl—I'm going to learn something about Winifred Dennis before I turn into bed to-night if I can—if I have to go to Redcliffe Mansions in search of it. What's more, I'll start at once."

And he started. The brooch he left upon the table.

CHAPTER XI.

IN REDCLIFFE MANSIONS.

MRS. BISHOP GUY was in, and Mr. Bishop Guy also; both of them were willing to see him. They had a small flat upon the third floor; the sitting-room into which Mr. Adair was shown was one of those diminutive apartments which one seems only to find in flats. Mr. Adair apologised for his appearance.

"I have taken very quick advantage of your invitation, Mrs. Bishop Guy; to have met you only this afternoon, and to be trespassing on you at this hour of the same day—is daring. My excuse is that something you said made me very anxious to see you."

"My anxiety is certainly equal to yours; we both wanted very much to see you, didn't we, Augustus?"

Augustus was Mr. Bishop Guy. He was not very much taller than his wife, had sandy hair, grey eyes, freckles, and a moustache.

"Very pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Adair. My wife has been talking about nothing else but you ever since she came in. What will you have to drink?"

"Nothing, thank you—at least just now."

"Directly Augustus sees a man he asks him what he'll have to drink. He seems to think that they are like certain plants which have always to be kept moist. Mr. Adair, where have I seen you before?"

Adair looked at the lady. She had on a sky-blue dress of rather complicated design, which became her very well. Although she was no longer a girl she was still young enough to be charming.

"I'm quite sure I have never seen you before. I should not have forgotten you if I had."

The visitor said this with an emphasis which made the lady smile.

"It's very nice of you to say so, Mr. Adair—I presume you intend to be complimentary; but if I haven't seen you before I've seen someone very like you. Your face is quite familiar, and, if I may say so, your figure also. There aren't many men about who are quite so tall as you. When I saw you coming up the lane this afternoon I said to myself—Where have I seen this man before?"

"My wife," explained her husband, "is always thinking she has seen people before, or someone exactly like them. It's a way she has."

"That isn't true, Augustus; and you've no right to say so. Husbands, I have already discovered, Mr. Adair, are apt to say things which they have no right to. So you're living at The Dovecote; are you comfortable?"

"I could not be more so; I am almost guiltily comfortable!"

"How do you mean guiltily? In what sense can one be guiltily comfortable?"

"I understood you to say this afternoon that you were a friend of Miss Dennis?"

"I am—her oldest friend. I won't say her only friend, although I fear I'm not very far from being that; that is why I wished to see you."

"Is she susceptible to your influence, as a friend ought to be?"

"That I couldn't say, until you explained further. In which direction do you wish me to use my influence?"

"May I take it that nothing I say to you will be repeated to her?"

"Can I count in the same way on you? I'll be as silent as the grave if you will."

"Then that's agreed. Now, Mrs. Bishop Guy, since you are her friend can't you use your influence to induce her to keep a servant?"

She laughed, as if she found the gravity of his manner amusing.

"You seem very serious. Why are you so anxious she should keep a servant?"

"Isn't it obvious? My feeling on the matter is purely selfish."

"I'm sure it is, since you are a man."

"She does everything about the house, performs the most menial tasks for me. Clearly she is a lady——?"

"She certainly is a lady."

"Very well then, I have some claims to be—I won't say a gentleman, but something thereabouts—and I'm supposed to sit still and let her do what no lady ought to do for a man, and not move a finger or volunteer the least assistance. Until recently she cleaned my boots."

"Who else was there to do it?"

"Who else? I'm such an idiot that it never

dawned upon me till the other day that she'd do a thing like that; when it did—well, since then I've cleaned them myself. She sweeps and she dusts, she goes down on her knees on the carpet in my sitting-room to sweep up my cigar ash. I don't know how she feels, but the idea of her doing things like that for me makes me hideously uncomfortable."

"She's your landlady's daughter, practically your landlady; you're her lodger, her only source of income."

"You don't really mean that all the money she has she gets from me?"

"I do. I'm pretty sure that she doesn't get a penny from anywhere else."

"But how does she live? What's the rent of the house?"

"I'm afraid she does not live very well; so how is she going to keep a servant?"

"Of course I'll pay for one. Mrs. Bishop Guy, I want to be frank with you."

"That's what I want you to be, Mr. Adair."

"I'm not a poor man, I'm—well, I'm not at all badly off."

"It's such a pleasure to hear of someone who isn't badly off; every one I know seems to be nearly starving."

"I've no one to spend my money on but myself."

"How delightful, I wish I hadn't—that is, if I had any to spend. I have a husband on whom I must spend mine."

The husband referred to interposed. "I like that! When did you spend any of your money on me?"

"I spent one and ninepence of my own on the

housekeeping only last week, which you owe me to this hour. I am haunted by a foreboding that I may have to lay out possibly another one and ninepence before next Saturday. However, I forgive you, Augustus, since you gave me a sovereign this morning. Well, Mr. Adair, you were saying?"

"I'm prepared to spend a reasonable sum of money on—on——"

"Your own comfort."

"On my own comfort—exactly; thank you, Mrs. Bishop Guy. Can't you induce Miss Dennis to see this and listen to reason. I'll take all the expenses of the house on my hands, provide a proper staff of servants——"

"It's come to a staff of servants now, has it? I thought just now it was only one."

"It requires more than one servant to do the work of that house properly."

"I suppose that means that Winnie hasn't done it properly. I'll tell her what you say."

"It means nothing of the kind. On the contrary—of course, you're only laughing at me—I want the household affairs to be put on a proper basis; Miss Dennis not to act only as my landlady's daughter, but to superintend everything, and actually to be suitably remunerated for what she does."

"What would you call suitable remuneration in a case like that?"

"That's a matter for consideration; I would pay her what she asked."

Would you? I should like to superintend that establishment of yours if you'd pay me what I asked. It would be better than being married to Augustus."

"I know Miss Dennis sufficiently well to be sure that her demands would not be extortionate."

"You seem to have a very high opinion of Miss Dennis."

"I have; the highest."

"Have you had very much to say to her? Plenty of friendly little chats."

"Not one. Until to-day I doubt if I have exchanged a dozen consecutive sentences with her. She keeps me at something more than arm's length."

"Does she? Perhaps she hasn't such a high opinion of you as you have of her."

"That's very possible. That's why I wish you to use your influence with her on my behalf. How long have you known Miss Dennis?"

"Nearly all my life. Her father was a Devonshire parson. His living brought him in less than a hundred and twenty pounds a year. He had a little money of his own, on the interest of which they practically lived; he tried to make it more, with the usual result. He got into the hands of rogues who swindled him out of every penny. He was in bad health when the news came; it killed him. He left a widow, a son, and a daughter. Has Miss Dennis spoken to you of her brother?"

"Not a word. I didn't know she had one. The only relative of whom she has spoken is her mother."

"Charlie Dennis was quite a nice boy. When his father died he was preparing for the India Civil Service—for the India Police. I think his prospects of passing were good. His father's death put an end to that; he had to turn out there and then to earn his bread and cheese; it turned his head."

"Do you mean that he went insane?"

"To all intents and purposes. I don't know quite what he did do, but I know it was what he ought not to have done. He got himself mixed up with a lot of very queer characters, and did something which brought him into contact with the police. The discovery that he had done this did for his mother, all in an instant."

"It killed her?"

"It would have been almost better if it had done. He was in the house, talking to her—she hadn't a suspicion that anything was wrong, and was very fond of her boy—when a policeman marched into the room and said that he had come to arrest him. He knocked the policeman down—in that sense he always had his wits about him; if anything, too much so; rushed through the door, and escaped. Not only did the policeman go down, but his mother went down also—her boy had hurt her more than the policeman, because she never rose again. She had a stroke—it had a medical name with which I needn't bother you: she is now entirely paralysed. She lies on her back, has never spoken since, and practically never moved. Winifred Dennis has not only had to act as general servant to you, Mr. Adair, she has had also to wait upon her mother hand and foot. The old lady can do absolutely nothing for herself, and is wholly dependent upon her daughter—luckily God has given her a very good one."

"What an awful tragedy. I had no idea of it."

"Winifred Dennis is not the sort of person to speak of her private affairs to anyone; least of all to a man whom she has only known for a few weeks, and whose only claim to her acquaintance is that he pays her for the rooms he occupies."

"Is that the way in which she looks at it?"

"In what other way could she look at it? She knows nothing about you, Mr. Adair. You knocked at the front door, a perfect stranger, and you've remained a stranger ever since. You have sense enough to see what a delicate position she occupies. Did she ever speak to you of me?"

"No; I tell you she has spoken to me of no one—except her mother."

"I was her lodger. She took The Dovecote because I agreed to take her rooms. I was a medical student in those days at a women's hospital in Gray's Inn Road; I am a qualified medical practitioner now, and entitled to practise on my husband—or on you. Then Augustus comes along, and he worried me; so, at last, to keep him still, I married him."

"That's it, state the case correctly. Mr. Adair has only to look at us to know it was all the other way—that all the worrying came from you."

This, of course, was Mr. Bishop Guy. The lady ignored his interposition.

"The original idea was that when we were married we should live at The Dovecote, but to this Augustus wouldn't agree."

"I should think not. I didn't want to start my married life in lodgings."

"So, in order to give the man no just cause for offence, I left The Dovecote and came here, and I'm afraid that I left Winnie rather stranded. What would have happened if it hadn't been for you, I don't know. When I heard of your appearance on the scene I sang a Te Deum." The lady, rising from her seat, crossed to a table which was in a

corner of the room. "I think, Mr. Adair, if I were now to offer you a little refreshment it might be welcome. Soda or plain water?"

"Soda, please. Thank you." He took the glass the lady offered him.

"Augustus, you can help yourself; confine yourself principally to soda. I wonder, Mr. Adair, if you would tell me anything about yourself if I suggested that I was interested—on Winnie's behalf?"

Mr. Adair, having helped himself from the tumbler, seemed to be considering.

"I can give you a banker's reference, Mrs. Guy, if that would be of any use. I think that my banker would convince you that I am a responsible person."

"Is that the only person to whom you can refer me?"

"I'm not in a position to refer you to my relations, if that is what you mean. My father and mother are both dead; with such other relatives as I have I am not at this moment on very good terms. Do I strike you as being the sort of person who requires credentials, other than can be obtained from his banker?"

"One likes to know with whom one is dealing, when circumstances seem to promise intimate relations with a person, doesn't one, Mr. Adair? However, as you hint, a banker's reference is a very great deal. It's more than some of us can give. I doubt if my banker would go out of his way to convince you that I'm a responsible person, and I've no doubt whatever about Augustus."

"You wait a bit, Ella; before very long I shall be on the high road to millions."

"Millions of what, farthings? I don't know what sum of money a million farthings represents, but I do hope that one day you will get at least within sight of it. But I'm afraid you're a long way from it now. Augustus is an inventor, Mr. Adair. Really he's a dealer in Manchester goods, calicoes and huckaback, and that sort of thing; we're people of no importance; but he doesn't see such golden prospects in Manchester goods as he would wish; so he has directed his surplus energies into other channels. Tell Mr. Adair what you've invented, Augustus!"

"He wouldn't be interested. Ella, what a nuisance you are! I shall have to do something, sir, to keep her in order. She's small——"

"And you are large—threequarters of an inch taller than I am."

"Her microscopic dimensions don't keep her from being active; you never know who she'll be getting at next. Of course, as my wife I have to put up with her, but there's no reason why you——"

The wife in question cut him short. "Augustus, show Mr. Adair what you have invented. Mr. Adair, aren't you interested in what Augustus has invented?"

Adair smiled; he seemed to find the attitude of these two people towards each other amusing.

"If it's no secret, I should very much like to know how Mr. Bishop Guy proposes to make his millions."

"Then, if he won't tell you I will. It's certainly no secret; the sooner the announcement of those two inventions are on the hoardings and occupying whole pages in the papers the better. They're very

practical inventions, Mr. Adair, as befits a dealer in Manchester goods. The first thing he has invented is the New Silk. It doesn't sound very imposing, does it ? "

Before the visitor could reply the husband took up the tale where his wife had left it, as she possibly was aware would be the case.

" It mayn't sound imposing, but before many years have passed it will be a staple article in all the world's markets. It will be found in all houses in civilised countries, and, in some form or other, on the person of every man, woman, and child."

" The New Silk ? And what is the New Silk ? "

" In the first place I perhaps need not tell you that there's no silk about it. It is a method I have discovered of treating substances which do not contain silk so that they become more silk than if they were silk ; that sounds Irish, but it is a fact. I'll show you samples." The little man put a cardboard box upon a table, which contained a number of small pieces of material, of all textures and of all colours. " Now, are those silk, or aren't they ? Handle them ; feel them ; put them into water ; do anything you like with them."

" They appear to me to be silk."

" Of course they do, and of the very finest quality, mind you. You couldn't get silk like that, twenty-two inches wide, wholesale for less than four shillings a yard. Now, I'll give it you seventy-two inches wide for eighteenpence. You pay sixty shillings a dozen for silk handkerchiefs at least ; I'll give you a finer quality for eighteen. Think what a future there is for a thing like that ; wear guaranteed, fast colours, washable, fine as the finest

linen, or thick and heavy as a blanket; and that's the New Silk. Can't you see it knocking the mediocre stuff for which the worms are responsible out of the market—clean?"

"I can conceive of it having a very great sale."

"I should think you could. There's no commonplace fortune in it—there's millions! I shouldn't wonder if Carnegie, Rockefeller, Pierpont Morgan, and Rothschild, all those fellows, were taught a bit about what it means to have money. There, that's one of my inventions, Mr. Adair. The other is a very simple thing, yet a thing which the world has been looking for—well, since Eve sewed herself a garment of fig leaves. It's a fastener. A woman puts it down the back of her dress instead of hooks or buttons. With a touch it is locked. I call it the Lock Fastener. There will be no gaping, no ventilated placket-holes; here it is, see for yourself; it can't come undone. Yet at a touch, you see, it's open."

Mr. Bishop Guy placed a number of small articles, fashioned in different substances, beside the cardboard box.

"The Lock Fastener can be used for gloves, for boots, for masculine and feminine garments of every sort and kind; and what's more, sir, it can be used for doors and windows. A window secured by my lock fastener won't rattle, and a burglar will find it a tough proposition. It can be used for everything, and anything, for which a fastener is required. There's a fortune in the New Silk, but I'm not sure that there isn't a bigger one in the Lock Fastener."

"And yet," observed the lady, "we occupy this sumptuous apartment on the third floor, dimensions

twelve foot by ten and a half, and Augustus owes me one and nine."

"And yet it seems to me that there might be money in your husband's two inventions."

"Might be! Might be!" Mr. Bishop Guy positively jumped in his desire to be emphatic. "You wait!—with your 'might be.'"

"When are they coming on to the market?"

"That's just it. When are they? They're fully protected; every process and every detail patented in every country in the world, and that has cost money; practically all the money I have. Now, I'm looking for a capitalist who'll launch these things, and who won't want the whole bag of tricks for himself, but who'll leave me some of the profits. I'd have no difficulty in finding men who'd put up money; big manufacturers would do it next week; but they'd want seventy-five, eighty, or eighty-five per cent. of the profits—some of them, my dear sir, would want more. I'm not treating on those lines, after all I've gone through, my hopes and dreams."

"On what lines would you treat?"

"Fair and honest lines—on a reasonable basis."

"How much money will be wanted?"

"I couldn't exactly say; you think it over and you'll see why. Production on a modest scale could be managed for quite a small sum; to supply the world's markets would require a large capital. I could start with five or ten thousand pounds. I should want a hundred thousand or more if I succeeded, as I'm sure I shall. But, of course, the great thing is to make a start, and I haven't five thousand pounds."

"I might provide the money on what you call

reasonable lines, if you could satisfy me as to the value of your inventions?"

"What! You? But you don't think I had you in view when I began to talk?"

"It so happens that I've a good deal of loose cash for which I'm seeking an opening. Presuming that you prove to my satisfaction that you're an honest man, Mr. Bishop Guy, and that these two inventions of yours are real good things, I might do worse than invest it in them."

"You certainly might do that, there's no doubt about it. You know there's no doubt about it, Ella! What—what do you call a good deal of loose cash, Mr. Adair?"

"I might begin with twenty-five thousand pounds and later I might find a hundred thousand."

The little man gasped; he seemed to have grown taller; his whole face shone.

"When—when would you be able to find the money if—if everything is satisfactory?"

"To-morrow, the day after, next week, whenever you want it."

"And you have twenty-five thousand pounds which you can get at with a stroke of the pen? Mr. Adair, give me your hand. My wife's a simpleton; and as for Winifred Dennis—when it comes to the serious things of life women don't count. Fancy wanting a man to give what my wife calls an account of himself when he's good for twenty-five thousand pounds with a stroke of his pen. And as for the satisfaction you want, Mr. Adair, you shall have that. If you allow me to go into certain details with you, I think you'll agree that for your loóse cash I shall offer you a very sound investment."

CHAPTER XII.

THE SECRET OF THE TABLE.

MARTIN ADAIR spent several days in the chambers at Mitre Court. He made several surprising discoveries. Almost the first one was the possibility of securing the chambers so that they resembled the strong rooms in safe deposit companies. A sheet of rolled steel had been inserted into the wall in such a manner that by turning a handle it ran right across the outer door. If intending felons got through the oak and the outer door there would still remain that steel for them to tackle.

Then there were guards for the windows in the shape of steel shutters which rose up and covered them. If those safeguards had been in regular use by the late Mr. Jerningham Creed he could hardly have come to the end he did. Adair came to the conclusion that they had scarcely ever been used; that they had only been intended for emergency purposes which in the old man's judgment never had arisen.

"I believe," he told himself one day when he had got all these ingenious contrivances in their places, "that his idea was not to use them as protection

against thieves, but as safeguards against their natural enemies—the police. For years he must have gone in fear of the police; what beats me is how he continued to be immune. He must have known that the moment the police got wind of what he had in here, to him it meant penal servitude for life. Also, possibly, he used these steel doors and shutters on certain days or nights in the year when he went in for a sort of general stocktaking. He must have taken stock at times, everything is in such order; the marvel is how he did it single-handed. While he was taking stock, and had things worth thousands of pounds spread out about him, that would have been an awkward moment in which to receive an unexpected visit, whether from the police or otherwise. I daresay it was on these occasions that this place had doors and windows of steel."

Another discovery which Adair made was of a most surprising kind; to him those chambers had been full of surprises, but that was perhaps almost the greatest of all. It took the shape of a secret door, in the old man's bedroom. A full length picture of a fine lady in the gorgeous raiment of the eighteenth century hung at the foot of the bed. It had apparently never been touched with a duster for years. Not only was the frame almost obscured, but the picture itself was covered with such an accumulation of dirt that it was not easy to make out if it was good or bad. Adair lifted it down one morning to see what was on the back of the frame; he had learnt to look on everything which the room contained as having something about it which was not upon the surface. He thought that he could

examine that picture to more advantage if he had it at close quarters than when it was hanging on the wall.

Directly he got the picture down he found that at any rate there was something odd about the wall against which it had been hanging. There was one of those indentations on its surface which he had learnt to know always meant something. The wall was not papered; it had originally been painted a sort of stone blue; that was many years ago. It needed repainting very badly. Where that indentation was, not only the paint, but the plaster, was broken away. Part of what seemed like an iron knob, which had once been hidden, was seen quite plainly. Adair pressed it; a sort of panel, some six inches square, came open, and there was a door handle. He turned the handle; a door yielding, revealed an aperture which was just large enough for a person to squeeze through. It was raised perhaps eighteen inches from the floor; there were steps beyond which descended through a narrow, winding sort of tunnel.

"Where does that go to?" he asked himself. What's beneath this room? Can it be a sort of secret passage to the street? There's a room on the other side of this wall, and beneath these rooms there are offices. What's the name of the people to whom they belong? Latraille, Olgano and Co. —I've seen the name often enough on the board at the door."

He hesitated, then decided to push his investigations farther. It was not very easy. If not very broad, he was more than usually tall; he had difficulty in squeezing through the narrow doorway.

"If I stick fast, I'm done. Since the whole place is steel-plated, I may call and call, even if anyone hears they won't be able to come to my assistance —so let us hope that I shan't stick."

He almost did, more than once. The steps seemed to narrow when he had descended two or three; for some interesting moments he thought that he really had got jammed. He held his breath to make himself as small as possible. He writhed and struggled, then found himself on a lower step, and a lower; then, squeezing round a corner, he was in utter darkness. The light had vanished from above, by reason of the turnings and twistings of the steps; there was blackness below. He descended still a step or two, then came into contact with what seemed to be a blank wall.

"This is extremely nice! I suppose I've ruined my clothes, if I haven't torn most of them right off me; it isn't likely that these walls are spotless. I must have wiped them clean. I have, perhaps, removed from them the deposits of ages. What's this thing in front?"

He struck out with the palm of his hand.

"Is that a wall or a door? I believe it's a door. Somehow it had a hollow sound." He struck again. "It is a door—how am I to get it open?" He moved his hand over the surface. "That feels like a handle. It is. How do you open the thing? Naturally, since it once had something to do with old Creed, there's some trick about it; of course, it doesn't turn like an ordinary Christian handle—push—pull —up, down—right, left—hallo! I don't know what I did, but something yielded—the door is open. It seems to be smaller than the one I came in by.

This is going to be a squeeze. I have got through alive! If it had been one inch smaller in any direction I never should. Pray, where and what may this place be? It looks as if it might be an ordinary office. I believe it is. Surely——"

He strode forward. He was standing in a good-sized room in which was the usual furniture of the ordinary office—desks, writing-tables, leather-seated chairs, deed boxes on shelves, a painted cupboard, a shabby bookcase, through whose glass doors, dim with dust, were seen what might be a miscellaneous collection of odd volumes treating of the law. As he neared the writing-table which stood in the centre, there was a clicking sound. He stopped, staring about him.

"What was that? It seemed to come from the table. More diversions? Can this be the office under Creed's chambers in the occupancy of Messrs. Latraille, Olgano and Company? Can the gentlemen belonging to those high-sounding names be myths, or dummies, and was the business carried on here a branch of that done by Mr. Jerningham Creed above? The more one investigates the private affairs of that estimable old gentleman the more surprising they become. I remember that I never did see anyone come out of this office, and once when I ventured to ask the old gentleman what sort of business was carried on below, since I never saw anyone about, he nearly snapped my head off. He was a smallish man, but he had a powerful knack of snapping. I'd wager a trifle that no one has been in this room since the old man died. There do appear to have been visits from the postman, who has left mementoes in scores."

A number of letters lay in a heap on the cocoanut matting close to the door. Mr. Adair picked them up.

"All addressed to Messrs Latraille, Olgano and Company. I wonder what business they carried on. They seem to have come from all the cities and countries of the world. Here's one from Japan. Would it be a breach of confidence if I were to look what's inside? Anyhow, here goes. Why, whatever language is this? I'm not likely to be much wiser, since the thing appears to be in Japanese. Surely old Creed wasn't a polyglot to the extent of understanding Japanese. Here's a letter from Paris."

Tearing the envelope open, he studied what was within.

"I thought I did understand French, and this is written in French; but it's double Dutch to me. The writer, who attaches no signature, and gives no address, says that he has dispatched a packet of crumbs, having removed the crusts, fresh from the oven; and he requests that the loaves may be placed in the usual bread pan. If that isn't what it means, I don't know what it does mean—and what that means is beyond me altogether. Messrs. Latraille, Olgano and Company seem to have had at least one eccentric correspondent."

As he returned towards the centre of the room he again heard the clicking sound which he had noticed on his first entrance.

"That certainly came from the table. There's something queer about that piece of furniture; I'll have a try at finding out what it is. Most of the articles about these premises seem to have peculiar properties."

Laying down the letters on the top of the table, starting to remove it from the spot on which it stood, he found that it refused to budge.

"That's so? It's fastened to the floor; I thought it might be. There's a spring in the floor which, when I stepped on it, clicked; not having been used just lately, it's probably a little rusty. That spring is connected with something in this table; probably it runs up the inside of one of the legs. Now what is there in this table which is actuated by a spring on which, when you cross the room, you are bound to tread? That's for me to learn."

He examined the table with curious minuteness. In it were two drawers. Both of them were locked. After some little difficulty he prised them open with a tool which he had in his pocket, telling himself as he did so:

"I'm getting an expert burglar; with a little more practice I shall become proficient. Then I'll be able to get into any strong room with a bent hairpin, as a really expert burglar is supposed to do. There doesn't seem to be anything in these drawers, except papers and memoranda, and that sort of thing. No doubt there's a lot of interest attached to them, which I'll go into later; but that's not what I'm looking for just now. Let's have the drawers out—that is, if they'll come."

He withdrew them entirely from the table—they came quite easily. "There's nothing peculiar about these drawers so far as the eye can see. Perhaps it's in the table itself; let me walk across that spring again."

He did not at once succeed in finding what he sought. He crossed between the table and the

door—between it and the aperture through which he had come; nothing clicked.

"That's life—when you don't want a thing you've got it; when you do it's never there. Something did click twice, I'll swear—as I was standing just about here. Perhaps I've eased the spring so that it moves noiselessly, as it was no doubt originally meant to do; or perhaps my imagination is a little keenly set, as after being in an atmosphere of this sort is only to be expected, and I heard something quite commonplace and thought it was something strange. There's one thing against that—why is the table fastened to the floor? Let's look the whole thing over again."

Going down on his knees, he studied the table from the front, putting his hand under the edge to see if there were anything unusual in its construction beneath.

"Those drawers don't go right across the table. There's room for two more on this side. There don't seem to be any signs of them, but if there is nothing there, why is the table boarded up beneath? I've a mind to drive my chisel right through the woodwork. What can I use for a hammer? Perhaps I can manage without one. There seems to be a sort of crack right across the woodwork just under the edge. If I can get so much as the point in that I can manage the rest."

He found that he had not undertaken an easy task. The keen edge of his cold chisel declined to allow itself to be insinuated into the crack in the wood. Striking the butt with his clenched fist was no use he needed something with which he could strike a more telling blow. There seemed to be nothing

available. There were no fire-irons in the rusty grate—nothing heavy anywhere.

"It seems that I'm not expert burglar enough to drive a chisel into hard wood without some sort of hammer. How about moving the table itself; how about getting it upside down? If at first you can't succeed, try another way. I'll try that!"

At the first trial the table remained immovable; it resisted all efforts to push it. Then he tried to lift it. The two legs of the side on which he was held fast to the floor. He tried the legs on the other side—tugged—tugged—tugged. Then it yielded just sufficiently to show that on that side at least it was no longer attached to the floor.

"That's it, is it? Now I begin to see. It's the two legs on the other side which are fastened down. That being so, if we get enough leverage on this side, we ought to force them loose."

Exerting all his strength, he raised the side of the table on which he was, inch by inch, until there was a snapping sound, which took him unawares, and before he could relax his efforts, the table went right over on the other side.

"Lucky I didn't go over too," was his comment. "What's that sticking out of that leg? Those two legs were screwed down by means of plates which were hidden by matting. I've done their business; they've broken away; but that thing sticking out is a wire which is connected with the something I trod upon, and which runs up the centre of the leg—as I thought. The question is, What happens when it gets to the top of the leg?"

As he stood looking down at his handiwork, something caught his eye.

"That looks as if I had done more than force the table loose; I shouldn't wonder if the jar it got has caused it to give away its secret."

Replacing the table on its legs, he found that part of the woodwork on one side had come away—a slight jerk induced it to come right away. A kind of little cupboard was disclosed, which contained something which, peer at it as closely as he might, was beyond his comprehension.

"What is the thing? Apparatus of some kind, but of what kind? Is it an electrical machine, or some sort of signal? My first idea was that when you stepped upon that spring you sounded an alarm somewhere about which would at once inform the attentive Mr. Creed that he had a visitor below; but that doesn't look as if it were anything in the signalling way. What can it be? I believe—it looks—it might be—I've got it! It's a camera! A thing with which you can take snapshots—on entirely novel lines. Anyone crossing from that door to the table was photographed without his knowing it."

He picked up the piece of woodwork which had come away.

"Yes, here's the shutter, in this slab of wood. It instantly rises and falls when the spring is trodden on, and in a flash the trick's done. I won't say what a diabolical, but what an ingenious contrivance. Jerningham Creed was really a marvellous old man. That of course is the film. Can I get it loose? I've got it. How many exposures can there be? There seems to be yards and yards of it. Once upon a time I was bitten by the photographic craze myself. I was constantly libelling both my friends and

enemies. I'll take care of this film; this is a handy cover which prevents the light getting at it until the proper moment. I used to be rather good at both developing and printing once upon a time. If that spring worked properly, and the lens was good, and the film, it's possible that I may find myself to be the possessor of a little gallery of portraits, for which the police might give something, and the originals—for their souls' sake, and to save their skins, and perhaps their necks—a great deal more."

As he stood up, with the roll of film in his hand, there came a knocking at the door—a furtive knocking, as if someone wished to make his presence audible while making the least amount of noise.

"Who may that be? A visitor for Messrs. Latraille, Olgano and Co., at this time of the day, so long after the firm has ceased to exist."

Martin Adair stood quite still. Presently the knocking came again—furtive as before. Then the flap meant for letters was pressed back; it was screened by a metal sort of hood, so that while letters could be inserted, no one outside could see into the room. Through the lifted flap there came the sound of whistling—someone without was softly whistling a few bars of a little tune.

"The visitor is a musician. Is that an air of his own composition, or is it a prearranged and familiar signal? Did Creed recognise the visitor when he heard that tune? My friend, whoever you are, you'll knock, you'll whistle, in vain; you'll remain unanswered; you'll stay outside; the firm is dead."

CHAPTER XIII.

OVER THEIR COFFEE.

THE two men were seated in the lounge of the Colossus Hotel, having had an excellent dinner in the restaurant. Martin Adair was on one side of a tiny table, his host, John Harper, was on the other. They were having coffee. Presently Adair said:

"Your note, Harper, asking me to dine with you to-night, came in the very nick of time. I wanted someone whom I could consult on certain rather delicate matters, and when I had your note I said to myself, this is just the man."

"*How?*" The speaker was a spare, dark man, whose black hair, cut very short, without any parting, so that it seemed to stand up on end, gave him an oddly foreign appearance. "You don't know much about me. How do you know that I'm a man you can consult on delicate matters? I met you in Paris, we chummed up together, I've seen you two or three times since, and practically that's the whole of our acquaintance. How do you know what sort of a person I am?"

His voice was very soft and quiet; he scarcely moved his lips as he was speaking. The whole man conveyed the impression of immobility.

"I know more about you than you suppose. I've been making enquiries about you, Mr. Harper."

"You have? That's good. And you've learnt?"

"I've learnt for one thing that you're one of the largest dealers in precious stones in Europe, and one of the finest judges."

"Who told you that?"

"A gentleman in Hatton Garden—a Mr. Isaac Abraham."

"Isaac Abraham? Yes, I know Mr. Isaac Abraham. Is it about precious stones that you wish to consult me?"

"I am myself a pretty good critic of a man, and I think, Mr. Harper, you may be safely consulted on other matters besides precious stones. But it's with precious stones I'm going to begin. I have something here, and I want you to tell me what you think of it."

"Are you a dealer, Adair?"

"I am not; but it so happens that certain articles have come into my hands on whose value I should like an expert opinion."

"Expert opinions can always be got; why come to me?"

"Because of what Mr. Abraham told me, and because of other reasons which I may touch on presently. I think you'll understand why I've come to you before I've done. Look at that!"

Mr. Adair took a small leather case out of his waistcoat pocket, opened it, and handed it across the table. Mr. Harper looked at it. Something happened to his face which suggested that what he saw surprised him; but the something was gone in an instant—his face was as expressionless as

before. He was so long examining what Adair had handed him that that gentleman, as if impatient of his continued silence, asked a question, leaning over the table as he did so.

"What do you think of it?"

Mr. Harper was still silent for some seconds, then, looking up, he met the other's eyes, and still for a moment or two he said nothing. Then he observed, so gently that it was almost like a whisper:

"Adair, I'm beginning to think that I ought to have made enquiries about you."

Adair smiled.

"You would not have learned very much if you had."

"Is that so? All I can say is that I don't quite grasp the situation. You casually take a little box out of your pocket; you hand it to me; it contains one of the world's most famous diamonds, and you ask me what I think of it."

"It is a diamond?"

"It is a diamond? You don't mean to tell me——" The speaker stopped, as if because of something which he saw in the other's eyes. "You don't wish me to believe that you are serious when you ask me if this is a diamond—this glorious stone which I'm holding between my finger and thumb? You're a little beyond me if you are serious."

"My knowledge of precious stones is only slight. I've never seen a diamond that size before, so I wondered if it really was one."

"This is becoming interesting." Mr. Harper sat a little forward in his chair, as if to convey by his movement how interested he was. "May I ask—we're in a confidential atmosphere—how this, which

you didn't know to be a diamond, came into your—charge ? "

" First of all tell me what it's worth."

" Worth ? A thing like this is worth what it will fetch. There are men in this hotel who, I daresay, would give you a hundred thousand pounds for it to-night."

" Really ? So much as that ? "

" They'd give it to you if you could submit its pedigree for their inspection ; but you can't. This stone has got a history."

" You seem to recognise it. Have you seen it before ? "

" No, I have not ; but I do not need to have seen a stone like this before to know it when I do see it. Do you mean to say you don't know the history of this stone ? "

" I don't. I'll tell you what I do know about it presently, it really amounts to very little. If you know its history, unless you have special reasons to the contrary, perhaps, you'll pass it on to me. I shall be very much obliged."

Mr. Harper had the little leather case on the table beside his coffee-cup. He touched with his finger tip the gleaming crystal it contained. His soft tones could only have been audible to the man immediately in front of him. Mr. Adair smoked his cigar as he listened.

" This is the Kaufmann diamond. It was found in Brazil at the beginning of the last century. It was sold to Kaufmann, of Amsterdam, whence its name. He was one of the big dealers of his day. He gave twenty-five thousand pounds for it in its uncut state."

"Wasn't that a big price to pay for an uncut stone, even of this size?"

"But Kaufmann had a customer for it before he paid a penny. The Rajah of Ahmednuggar, who had lately come into possession of the Rajahship, wanted something big in the way of diamonds to stick in his turban, and for other purposes. Kaufmann told him of the stone, and he agreed to buy it. The exact sum he gave for it when cut is not known; but it is known that Kaufmann made a big fortune out of that single deal. It remained the property of the Rajahs of Ahmednuggar until eighteen hundred and ninety seven—that was Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee year. All the world came to London to do her honour, and themselves honour. The Rajah of Ahmednuggar thought that he would come, and he came; and he brought this stone with him. But he never took it away again. When he returned to Ahmednuggar he went without the Kaufmann diamond."

"Why? Had he got rid of it in some way, or what had become of it?"

"It was stolen. I don't think anyone knows quite when it was stolen, and no one knows how, except the thief or thieves. The Rajah wore it in Westminster Abbey, and at Buckingham Palace, and at Windsor Castle, and at some of the big things in town; but when he was on the steamer on his homeward journey, and wanted it for some function which was to take place on board, it couldn't be found; it never has been found since."

"Was a great fuss made about it at the time? I don't remember to have heard of it."

"There was no fuss. You understand, I'm not

pretending to tell you the secret history of the stealing of the Kaufmann diamond; but whispers reached me—whispers do sometimes reach me—and it was whispered that a lady was mixed up with the business. It would have been awkward for the Rajah if certain little incidents had got into the daylight—so he put up with his loss and did his best to smile."

"I gather that nothing was made public. Then, if that is so, how can you be sure that the stone ever was stolen, unless you had special information?"

"I had special information—a good many of us had. A word went round that the stone had gone, and that we were to keep our eyes open. It was intimated that if it were returned the sorrowing owner would pay a good round sum and ask no questions. I've asked myself a good many times, Mr. Adair, what became of that stone. Jewels—famous jewels—have vanished more than once—vanished as completely as if they had never been, so completely that nothing has been heard or seen of them since. A good many dealers have asked questions of themselves and others. It's like hidden treasure—people go to hunt for it in the Spanish main. If a man could only get an inkling of an idea where it might be worth while to look for any of these missing jewels he'd start on the quest to-morrow. It's a world of coincidences, Adair; it's funny that you should come to me with this." Once more the tip of his finger rested on the glowing stone. "It's a special problem I set myself to solve some years ago—what became of the Kaufmann diamond? Can you give me the solution?"

"I fancy, Harper, you know a good many things

about men and affairs of which you don't care to speak. Do you know anything about me?"

"I don't—not a single thing. I met you in Paris, I rather liked you—partly, perhaps, because I could see with half an eye that as regards class you and I were under different headings. I took you for a man who was born in the purple, one of our bloated aristocrats. My father kept a sort of marine store. I fancy he married my mother because it was cheaper to keep a wife than a servant—she wanted no regular wages. I began my education in the Penton Road Board School, and there I finished it. I fancy you went to Eton, and the university, and I daresay that you could give me an intimate description of the interiors of half the great houses in England. You remember, perhaps, that in Paris I asked you no questions?"

"I noticed it; you didn't even ask my name."

"Because I had learnt from the hotel register that it was Adair. I know something about the great families of England, but I don't think there's an Adair among them; so, as you say, I didn't even ask your name. And I've made no inquiries about you from that hour to this. But when you take out of your waistcoat pocket a little leather box containing the Kaufmann diamond, and hand it over to me and ask me what I think of it, the matter assumes a different complexion."

"You think the time has come to make inquiries?"

"Well, if a man handed you the title deeds of the Bank of England you'd feel a sort of mild curiosity as to how he became possessed of them."

"I am quite prepared to tell you how I became possessed of that. Indeed, that's one of the reasons

why I was so anxious to see you; I wanted to tel you, and to consult you."

"I can assure you, Mr. Adair, that I'm very willing to listen and to be consulted. I've a nose for this kind of thing, and I rather fancy that I'm going to hear what one of the newspapers calls a queer story."

"I really think you are; and one of the queerest parts of it is that I have not myself yet got to the bottom of its queerness." The speaker glanced round the lounge. "Don't you think this rather a public place? We have it pretty well to ourselves, but still——"

"You're right—there are waiters." Mr. Harper rose from his chair. "Put that lump of crystal back into your pocket, Mr. Adair. There's at least one man in this building who would recognise it if he had the chance. Perhaps we'd both of us rather he didn't. I've a private sitting-room upstairs. If you'll honour me with your company, we'll talk there —of some of the strange things in heaven and earth which are undreamed of in some men's philosophy.'

CHAPTER XIV.

JOHN HARPER.

"YOU seem comfortable in here." They were in Mr. Harper's sitting-room. Adair was glancing round it. "This doesn't seem to be the sort of apartment to which one is generally introduced when one asks for a private sitting-room in a hotel."

"It isn't. I live here when I'm in town, so I keep on this little suite, which is pretty full of my own belongings, which makes a difference. Is that chair all right?" The visitor was settling himself in a big leather armchair. "Then that's all right; and since you're all right, I don't want to hurry you, but I'm rather keen to hear your story. I'm conscious all the while that you've got the Kaufmann diamond in your waistcoat pocket, and I'm all over curiosity as to how it got there."

Adair looked up from the fresh cigar which he had lighted.

"Did you ever hear of a man named Creed?"

One had a feeling that the question rather took Mr. Harper by surprise. He answered the question with another.

"What Creed was that?"

"Jerningham Creed. He had chambers in Mitre Court."

"What about him?"

"He was murdered not long ago; you probably heard of it."

"It's very possible; one does hear of a good many people being murdered."

"He was an old man, probably eighty years of age. He lived all alone in his chambers, which consisted of five rooms—his own office, a little room which was used as his clerk's office, his dining-room, his bedroom, and a good-sized sort of den which he used as a lumber-room."

"You seem to have an intimate acquaintance with his chambers."

"I have. He was found one Wednesday morning lying on the floor of his own office. He was in his night-shirt. When he was first found he had been dead some hours. The theory was that in the middle of the night he had heard someone moving about his office, had got out of bed to see who was there, and that someone had killed him. He had been struck on the head with so much force that the blow had not only broken his head, but also his neck."

Mr. Adair, pausing, leaned back in his seat, and for some seconds smoked his cigar in silence. Mr. Harper said nothing; he watched his visitor. Presently Adair went on.

"That's as far as the police, up to the present moment, have got. They have not discovered the criminal or any trace of him. I was Jerningham Creed's clerk, the only one he had; he had other assistants of a kind, plenty of them, but they weren't clerks. Although he sometimes spoke of me as his

junior clerk, I was the only one he had. He made me his heir." Another pause; then he added: "I've a sort of fancy, Harper, that you knew this before I told you."

Silence. Not a muscle of Mr. Harper's face moved; yet something looked out of his eyes which suggested that he was keeping himself tightly in hand.

"You are both right and wrong. I knew something of Creed; I heard of his death. I was told that he had left all his money to a clerk, but until this moment I had no notion that the name of that clerk was Martin Adair. I cannot picture you as a clerk."

"You would if you had seen me then, living on something under a pound a week, with my trousers up to my knees."

"How came you to be in such a plight?"

"That's a long story. I don't propose to go into it now. Why Creed made me his heir I have not the faintest notion."

"When I heard that Creed had left his money to his clerk I said to myself that that clerk, being a certain sort of man, had made it clear to him that it was the only thing he could do."

"You're in error. I was the clerk, and until Mr. Foster asked me to call on him at his office, and there made me acquainted with the contents of Mr. Creed's will, I had not the faintest idea that he had left me a penny. Why he did is beyond me altogether."

"He had his reasons."

"How do you know?"

"I admit this much. I knew enough of Creed to be aware that he never did a thing in his life

without having what appeared to him to be a sound reason. He had his own reasons for making you his heir; I'm prepared to bet on it."

"I have not been able to find a reason. Over and over again I have asked myself what it could have been. I have looked for it among his papers, but I have never found it."

"You will; and when you do it's quite likely that you won't be altogether pleased. Creed probably didn't leave you what he did because he wished to do you a good turn; he possibly had some malicious motive of his own; he was that sort of man."

"You seem to have known Jerningham Creed tolerably well. I thought you did." There was an appreciable interval of silence.

There was a new dryness in Mr. Harper's tone when he spoke again.

"What made you think that? Was it mere surmise?"

"Not altogether; I'll tell you presently what my reasons were. I had some."

"It appears to me, Mr. Adair, that you and I have been keeping dark from each other."

"If that is so, then I believe it to be without intention on either side. You know that Creed was ostensibly a money-lender?"

"So I have understood. I thought it was something more than pretence."

"It was; he did a very large business as a usurer. He had branches all over the place; persons who were really his agents acted for him in all parts of England. But he was something besides a usurer. Don't you know what that something was, Mr. Harper?"

"Why are you looking at me in that very significant way?"

"I've not yet been able clearly to understand the situation, but it appears to me that he must have been a dealer in stolen valuables, especially jewels, on an amazingly large scale. Didn't you know that? You told me downstairs that whispers sometimes reached you. Did no whisper ever reach you to that effect?"

"You're still looking at me as if you intended your glances to be full of meaning, Mr. Adair. Have you any particular cause to associate me with that unholy knowledge?"

"Did you ever hear of a firm styled Latraille, Olgano and Company?"

"You look me very straight in the face. Out with it, my dear man, what are you implying?"

Adair took a letter-case out of his pocket, and from the case something which he handed to Mr. Harper.

"Have you ever seen the original of that? Isn't that your portrait?"

Before looking at what the other had given him Mr. Harper very steadily eyed the man in front of him. Then he transferred his glance to what he was holding in his fingers.

"This does seem to be my portrait; it's not a very good one, in fact, it's a very bad one, but I shouldn't be surprised to learn that it was supposed to be me. You're a very mysterious person, you know, Adair. I had no idea what a piece of mystery I was in for when I asked you here to dine. The more I look at this product of the photographer's art, the more it puzzles me; it more than smells of the amateur—it reeks of it. What I'm asking myself is, when and

where did I pose for the artist who had used me so cruelly? May I ask where you got this portrait, Mr. Adair?"

"It was taken in the office of Messrs. Latraille, Olgano and Company."

"What!" This time Mr. Harper seemed genuinely stirred. He took his cigar from between his lips and opened his eyes.

"That's why I asked if you knew a firm styled Latraille, Olgano and Company, because, as I say, that portrait was taken in their office."

"You're getting more and more mysterious, Mr. Adair. There's something at the back of all this. May I ask you to speak plainly and tell me what you mean?"

"Will you first tell me if you are acquainted with the firm of Latraille, Olgano and Co.?"

"How can I tell you off-hand if, among the hundreds of firms with whom in my time I have done business, I was ever what you call acquainted with the people you name. I may once have visited their office."

"You have visited it more than once; you have visited it at least twice; because that portrait is also yours."

Taking something else from his letter-case the visitor passed it to his host. Mr. Harper just glanced at it, then rose to his feet.

"Mr. Adair, I'm now beginning to understand why you were of opinion that the smoking lounge was rather a public place for the sort of conversation you had in your mind. You said you'd been making inquiries about me, but you did not say to what length those inquiries had gone; your knowledge

of me seems to be of rather a singular kind. It doesn't seem to me to be quite fair, because I know nothing about you. Since both these things which you call portraits are clearly meant to represent me, and I stood for neither, perhaps you'll explain how they came to be taken."

"The difficulty is that I can't, unless you admit your acquaintance with the office of Messrs. Latraille, Olgano and Co."

"Well, if I do?"

"You have a picture of it in your mind's eye?"

"I might. So far as I recollect it was very much like any other office."

"It was, in appearance. Do you remember an old writing-table which stood in the centre of the room?"

"I believe I do. I'm not quite certain, but, well, there was sure to be a writing-table. What would an office of that sort be without one?"

"In that writing-table there was a camera concealed."

"How could that be? How could there be a camera in a writing-table?"

"One of these days I may be able to show you. You may take it from me that there was. The presumption is that Messrs. Latraille, Olgano and Company had some very curious customers. For reasons of their own they were anxious to have mementoes of their visits—or, at least, of some of them. When they expected such a visit, they set the camera in a particular way, and the visitor passing from the door towards the table, set it in motion, and without his having the least idea of anything of the kind, his photograph was taken."

"And you have come across these photographs; I am beginning to see daylight."

"I haven't exactly come across the photographs, but I've come across the camera. It contained the longest film I ever saw, long enough for a cinematograph picture. I developed it; I printed from the result, and found myself possessed of quite a gallery of portraits. Those which you are holding are two of them. As you put it, they are not very good, but under the circumstances, what could you expect? At any rate, one can see that they represent you!"

"Still I don't understand. You say these photographs were taken in the office of Messrs. Latraille, Olgano and Co. What were you doing there?"

"Who do you suppose was Latraille, Olgano and Co.? Don't you know?"

"The only member of the firm I ever saw was Latraille. He was a thin, cadaverous-looking party, with a thick mop of red hair, a pair of the bushiest eyebrows I ever saw, and a ridiculous moustache. I always wondered what nationality he was; he seemed to speak all languages equally well, except English; his English was a little difficult to follow. I did my business with him in French—he spoke it fluently—but I had a notion that in spite of his flaming head he was an Armenian Greek."

"No, he wasn't! He was English."

"How do you know? I tell you he spoke English as if the mere effort to speak it gave him lockjaw. What do you mean, too, by he was? Is the man dead? When did he die, and how? No intimation ever reached me."

"He was murdered!"

"The deuce he was! There seems to be an epidemic of murder in that neighbourhood."

"I found his hair, eyebrows and moustache in a little box in his bedroom. I'll show you them one day. I propose to show you a good many things, Harper, and I think you'll find some of them quite interesting."

"Adair, are you pulling my leg? What do you mean by you found his hair, eyebrows and moustache? You speak as if they were detachable."

"That's precisely it. They were. I've a strong suspicion that the man you knew as Latraille, the sole representative of Latraille, Olgano and Company, was Jerningham Creed."

"It's not possible. You have Jerningham Creed on the brain. Latraille was a foreigner. Besides—Jehoshaphat! If you should be right? That might explain!"

"I am right; what does it explain?"

"It explains——" Mr. Harper stopped; for so self-possessed a gentleman he seemed to be a trifle confused. Then he went on. "It might explain a good many things. I'll come to that presently. I see, Adair, you have something on the tip of your tongue; out with it!"

"If, for any reason, Harper, you don't wish to answer the question I am going to put to you, don't. You may have a hundred good reasons for not wishing to make a confidant of me. I have no desire to be intrusive."

Mr. Adair paused. Mr. Harper regarded him with a shadow of a smile playing about his tightly-closed lips. It was he who went on.

"You were about to ask me what I was doing in

Latraille's office?" The other nodded. "You are suggesting that Creed upstairs and Latraille below were one and the same person, and were both dealers in stolen goods. I'm not commenting on your suggestion; you may be right or you may be wrong. I can only assure you that consciously I never trafficked in property of the kind. I went to Latraille to buy jewels in the ordinary way of business. He used occasionally to write to me to say that he had a small parcel of rubies, emeralds, diamonds—it might be one, it might be the other, it might be stones of any kind—to offer; he would be glad to show them to me when I happened to be in town; if I would write before I came he would make an appointment; he only saw customers by appointment. I have all his letters. I remember that sentence was in all of them—that he only saw customers by appointment. I'd make an appointment; I'd call; he'd show me his parcel; I bought them or I didn't."

"Generally you bought them."

Harper regarded the speaker with inquiring eyes. He seemed to be reflecting.

"I believe I did. But how do you know?"

"When you pay me a visit in Mitre Court I will lay my reasons for knowing that, and certain other facts, before you. I think you will find them conclusive. I think, also, that as a rule he sold them to you a little under the market price."

"I admit that I certainly found no desire on his part to overcharge me. But perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me now, instead of later on, how you come to know these things. It seems to me, Adair, that you're not quite playing the game. You appear

to be in possession of—I don't know what facts, which you may be construing to my disadvantage."

"Creed, figuring as Latraille, kept a sort of day-book. For instance, there was an entry—'Four rubies'—then he gives a reference to another volume; then he states what he calls their value—say one hundred pounds; then that he offered them to J. H. for eighty pounds, that you would only give sixty pounds, at which price he sold them. He was a very methodical man. I found in a safe to which no one could have had access but himself, certain volumes which contained the most remarkable information. There is one in which he gives particulars of the initials which are contained in the day-book of which I have just been telling you. For instance, he explains that J. H. stands for John Harper. Then he gives a short biographical sketch of John Harper, with his address, or addresses, notes on his character, and financial position."

"This is pleasant hearing, Adair. I should very much like to see what that volume says about me."

"Nothing very much to your disadvantage, Harper. Coming from old Creed, I should say that his comments on you amount to a first-rate testimonial. You shall see them for yourself before very long. Then there's another volume in which he explains the references, say, to the 'four rubies'; you find a sort of history of those four rubies under their reference number—who they belonged to; whose hands they passed into, and how; how they came to him, and sometimes other extremely interesting details. Those two books, if they fell into certain hands, would be worth—untold money."

"And I suppose if it were known that you had

them your life wouldn't be worth twenty-four hours' purchase."

"I'm not so sure. Attempts have been made on it already. I pass my days and nights in an atmosphere which reeks of danger; that's no exaggeration—it's a simple statement of a plain fact. But I'm inclined to think that he spoke truth who said that threatened men live long."

"Don't you make any mistake about that. If the fiat has gone out from certain quarters that A.B. is to die, we'll say within seven days, within seven days A.B. will be dead, as surely as you and I are standing here."

"Then we'll hope, if I'm A.B., that the fiat has not gone forth. Harper, I want you to come to Mitre Court—not for a few hours on one occasion only—but I want you, in a sense, to camp out with me there. I want to go with you through all the possessions of the late Mr. Jerningham Creed; then I want you to advise me. Certain articles—as, for instance, the Kaufmann diamond—are stolen property beyond a shadow of a doubt."

"You knew that it was the Kaufmann diamond, and you knew its history?"

"I did. I wanted to find out what you knew. I'm seeking an expert, Harper, a man who knows, a strong man; I'm asking you to come with me into the danger zone."

"I shouldn't mind that in the least. I should rather like it."

There was something in the expression on the speaker's face which was more eloquent than his words. He looked every inch a fighting man.

"When you and I have grasped the true inward-

ness of old Creed's belongings—as I told you—I shall want your advice. Certain things will have to be restored to their owners—you'll agree with me on that point; they shall be restored. About certain others there are doubts, of various kinds; tell me what you think ought to be done with them —it shall be done." After justice has been pushed even to the verge of quixotism, I believe that there will still be a residue, a large one. Jerningham Creed was not a thief only."

The two men had been standing facing each other. When Adair had finished his sentence he moved so that his face was turned from the other; he trifled with an ornament which was on the mantelshelf.

"One of these days I may tell you something about myself; now I only propose to tell you this. I want a sum—a large sum of money—to right a wrong; until that wrong is righted I shall be seeing bogeys. Out of the honest residue of old Creed's fortune I think there will be enough to enable me to right that wrong and to get rid of the bogeys; and I fancy there will still be something left for me. What do you say, will you come with me to Mitre Court? I will repay you for your services in any way you like."

"My dear Adair, I know nothing about you, but you are each moment becoming to me a more interesting problem. But my instinct tells me—it has told me all along—that you are a man I can trust. I don't know what you know about me, or what is in old Creed's biographical note; I won't pretend that I'm a simple-minded innocent, few men in my trade are. I have sometimes bought in the best

market, perhaps Creed says so; but I gather from what you've just been saying that your instinct tells you that you can trust me. You can?"

"My good man, I've not the slightest doubt of it. You're the sort of man I should like to have with me in a fight."

And I like fighting. You can make me no more tempting offer than you have just done. I know nothing I should like better than to go through old Creed's treasure chests, his note-books, papers, portrait gallery—as you put it—all his belongings—with you. No more alluring prospect could be presented to the eye of my imagination. As for paying me for my services—talk sense! I'll camp out with you in Mitre Court, and I'll be glad to do it, because, unless I'm very much in error, in camping out with you, I shall have the time of my life."

When, later, the two men had bidden each other good-night, and the host had seen his guest leave the hotel, in less than a minute, before John Harper had time to return to the lounge, Martin Adair reappeared. Mr. Harper looked round at the sound of his voice.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed. "What's up? Have you forgotten anything?"

Adair went close up to him, speaking a little under his breath.

"Yes. I've forgotten this."

Adair held out a small leather case; the other glanced down at it.

"Why?" he asked. "What's that?"

"It's the Kaufmann diamond. I want you to take charge of it for the night. There's a gentleman outside whose face I fancy I've seen before.

I daresay some friends of his are not very far away. Possibly adventures are in store for me on my homeward road. I don't mind that in the least, they'd be a pleasant wind-up to the evening; but —in case of misadventure—I should like to feel that the Kaufmann diamond was in safe keeping. They would so like to find it in my pocket, and I would so like to disappoint them."

"I'll come with you, Adair, at least a part of the way. I also have a taste for adventure."

"You'll do nothing of the kind. You'll stay where you are, and you'll take charge of the Kaufmann diamond. Good-night!"

Before John Harper could stop him the other had gone. He had left behind him the little case. Harper snapped the case open.

"The Kaufmann diamond is inside!"

The words implied a doubt; he smiled as the stone gleamed up at him. Then, going to the great door of the hotel, he looked down the street. He saw Martin Adair's tall figure, striding along, having already nearly reached the bottom. Harper spoke to the night watchman, who had come out on to the step.

"Have you seen any queer-looking customers hanging about just lately?"

"It depends what you call queer-looking customers." The watchman's tone was gruff. "I saw a Chinaman about ten minutes ago. He was standing on the step, looking through the door into the hall. He made off when I went to ask him what he wanted."

"You're sure the fellow was a Chinaman?"

"I didn't get a very good view of him, but from

what I did get he looked as if he were a Chinaman even if he wasn't. I should have set him down as a Chinaman."

"Where did he go to?"

"That's what I wondered. When I got into the street he had vanished. I couldn't see him anywhere."

CHAPTER XV.

HER MOTHER.

ONE afternoon Mrs. Bishop Guy called at The Dovecote. She observed to Miss Dennis, who admitted her :

"I suppose you're in!" The girl told her, with rather a watery smile, that she was, whereupon the visitor assumed an air of severity. "Then you ought not to be. I do not wish, Winifred Dennis, to comment upon your behaviour, because you're incorrigible—but you look as if you hadn't been out for months."

"I have so little time to go out," the young lady explained.

"Stuff and nonsense! I know better." The little lady's manner was quite bellicose. "When I was your lodger I used to make you go out; but, of course, Mr. Adair, being a mere man, is helpless. You take advantage of his helplessness to bully him."

"Ella!" Miss Dennis slightly flushed. "What ridiculous things you say. You little know Mr. Adair if you think that anyone could bully him. As if I should want to, if anyone could!" The girl checked her visitor as she was turning the handle

of a door. "That's Mr. Adair's sitting-room, you can't go in there."

"I can, and I shall. I've come to talk about Mr. Adair—to say nothing of this having been my sitting-room not so very long ago. If he comes and finds us here I shall tell him that I came to see him, and you'll see how flattered he'll be. Which is his own particular arm-chair? I suppose this is. I shall sit in it." The lady established herself in the largest arm-chair which the room contained. "A person of my delicate proportions is lost in a monstrous piece of furniture like this—but that doesn't matter. Well, my dear, has your treatment of your lodger improved? Poor, wretched man!"

"Ella, that is Mr. Adair's arm-chair; I don't think you ought to sit in it. If you will come into this room—really."

"Don't you? Then I shall! I shall sit where I choose. This chair is four times too large for me, but I intend to occupy as much of it as I possibly can." When she got well back on to the seat her short legs only just reached the edge, so that her feet were straight out in front of her. "I don't know if you're aware, my love, that I now regard Martin Adair almost as if he were a sort of relation of mine."

"Since I happen to know that he cannot possibly be anything of the kind I won't pretend to understand. I don't know if you mean to be funny, but you're often absurd."

"That's a nice way to speak to me, considering that you haven't seen me since I don't know when."

The air of offended dignity with which Mrs. Bishop Guy strove to regard Miss Dennis was belied

by the twinkle which was in her eyes. Miss Dennis's manner was inclined to be a trifle curt.

"I'm very glad to see you, Ella, as you know perfectly well, but I do think you might be a little careful about what you say—at least. For instance, what do you mean by saying that you look upon Mr. Adair as if he were a sort of relation of yours?"

"I shall always feel that my husband's partner is a sort of relation."

"Your husband's partner! Ella, what are you talking about?"

"Don't you know that Mr. Martin Adair is now part proprietor of the New Silk and the Lock Fastener? If he has not told you so much it is because he's so much afraid of you that he dare tell you nothing."

The visitor was taking her ease in the big arm-chair; the girl remained standing. She drew herself a little straighter.

"Ella, may I ask you not to joke about things of that sort? Mr. Adair is not afraid of me; I doubt if he's afraid of anything in this world. I'd rather you didn't pretend he was. Please, would you mind telling me if you are serious when you say he's your husband's partner?"

"I shouldn't be one whit less serious if you were to sit down; it's not good manners to stand there glowering at me." Miss Dennis placed herself on the seat which was nearest. "That's right, take the most uncomfortable chair in the room; tacitly reproach me with choosing the best."

"Would you mind telling me—is Mr. Adair Mr. Lilliop Guy's partner?"

"He is—he's the head of the firm. He opened an account in the name of the firm for ten thousand pounds some days ago; he's going to pay in further sums as required. In less than no time the New Silk and the Lock Fastener will be on the market; they will come as a boon to millions."

Miss Dennis was silent, seeming not altogether at her ease; a spot of red flamed on either cheek. There was a slight quaver in her voice when she spoke.

"I'm not quite sure that I like what you've told me, Ella."

"Pray why? What is there about my statement of a plain fact which you dislike?"

"You introduced yourself to Mr. Adair, you know."

"I did. Well, what then?"

"I don't want to seem nasty, but was it your intention, before you introduced yourself to him, to try and persuade him to put money into your husband's inventions?"

"Your question sounds nasty, my pet, even if it isn't meant to be; but I don't mind telling you that it wasn't. I wanted to find out what sort of person he was—that's why I introduced myself to him. It was quite a discovery to me to find that he had so much money to put into anything. But I may inform you, for your own personal satisfaction, that the matter has been gone into most thoroughly, and the result has convinced him that he is embarking on a most excellent investment. I assure you that I shouldn't wonder if he got back a hundred sovereigns for every one he invests."

Miss Dennis did not receive this bold assertion

with such a show of enthusiasm as her friend might have desired.

"I hope you are right," was all she said.

"I am right." There was an interval of silence during which the ladies observed each other. Miss Dennis did not look as though she were in the sweetest of tempers; Mrs. Bishop Guy was smilingly bland. She said presently, with a little air of malice, "My dear, you are full of charm, but—why are you such a pig?"

"Does *that* question need answering?"

Mrs. Bishop Guy ignored the sarcasm which was in the speaker's tone.

"It needs it very much, my dear; the pity is that you don't seem to know it. Martin Adair is one of the nicest men I ever met."

"He would be—if he put his money in your husband's inventions."

"He is in the most complete sense of the word what I understand as a gentleman. The purpose of his first visit to Redcliffe Mansions was to tell me what a high opinion he had of you."

"It was very good of him—but was it absolutely necessary?"

"What's your objection to the man?"

"I don't know that I have any."

"You must have."

"Why must I?"

"Or you would not treat him as you do."

"How do I treat him? He's our lodger; in what respect don't I treat him as if he were my lodger?"

"The man wants to be comfortable."

"Isn't he comfortable? If he isn't, why doesn't he leave?"

"He wants to arrange with you to have the establishment put on a different footing—this establishment, I mean. He wants to have a proper staff of servants kept, to have the house what a gentleman's house ought to be. He's willing to find the money for this. Why you should object I can't even guess, unless it is because, as I said, you are such a pig."

"I think I am beginning to see daylight. Ella, has Mr. Adair commissioned you to come here and tell me this?"

"He daren't tell you himself, because he's afraid. What has the man ever done to you that you should take pleasure in reducing him to such a state of imbecility?"

Miss Dennis remained portentously silent; as if for some cause she was afraid of losing her self-control. When she did speak there was again a slight tremor in her tone.

"I am obliged to you, Ella, for having done Mr. Adair's errand so well: he ought to be obliged to you also. Do you mind changing the subject? How is Mr. Bishop Guy?"

Instead of replying to this inquiry, out of the depths of her arm-chair the visitor regarded her friend with that odd little twinkle in her eyes. Then she said, with an air of finality:

"Winnie, you are a pig."

"You shan't talk to me like that—you shall not."

"But if you are a pig?"

"Ella, will you be so good as to get it into your head that I will not allow you, nor anyone, to interfere in my private affairs. I understand them and you don't. Certainly, where Mr. Adair is concerned——"

"Yes? What about Mr. Adair?"

At that rather inopportune moment, without any sort of warning, the door gently opened, and the owner of that name stood looking into the room. It was not easy to decide which was the more confused—the ladies or the gentleman. He began to apologise.

"You must really forgive me for coming in like this, but I had no idea that my room was being so honoured. How are you, Mrs. Bishop Guy? Pray don't trouble to get out of that chair in order to shake hands. It is rather an awkward size."

The lady seemed to be trying to divest herself of any appearance of embarrassment.

"It's my fault for sitting in your room. Winnie didn't want to come. I made her."

"I'm glad you did. Now that you are here, won't you and Miss Dennis have tea with me?"

Mrs. Bishop Guy was withdrawing herself, not very gracefully, from the big arm-chair.

"I'm afraid I can't. My husband expects to find me when he comes home, and if he does not——" The unfinished sentence was apparently meant to be significant. "I should love to accept your invitation—I'm so sorry that I can't; but I have no doubt that Winnie will, and, as she's in the house, you can make her."

The lady would not be persuaded to stay. When her friend had seen her off the premises, Mr. Adair called from his room.

"Miss Dennis!" The girl appeared in the doorway. "You heard what Mrs. Bishop Guy said—won't you have tea with me? I should feel so honoured."

"Thank you, Mr. Adair; you are very good, but I'd rather not."

The girl was about to withdraw; he checked her.

"One moment, Miss Dennis, if you please. What were you saying about me when I came into the room?"

The girl flushed. "I don't think that's a fair question."

"Perhaps not. I wish to say something to you, Miss Dennis, which I intend to say." There was something in his tone which caused the girl to seem startled. "To begin with, are you going to engage a cook or am I?" She echoed his words.

"A cook! Mr. Adair! What do you mean?'

"I mean this, Miss Dennis. I intend, in a sense, to be the master of The Dovecote. I'm not going to allow you to live the life you are living any longer. There's going to be a change in the domestic arrangements. By way of inaugurating that change will you be so good as to introduce me to your mother?"

The girl was staring wide-eyed at the speaker. "Mr. Adair, I—I can't."

"And why can't you? I know Mrs. Dennis is an invalid, but I understand she's not in a state in which her introduction to me would make her worse. Would it do harm if she made my acquaintance, Miss Dennis?"

"I—I don't know that it would do her harm," the girl stammered. Clearly, she was disconcerted by this new phase in the lodger's bearing. Hitherto he had always held himself humbly in her sight; now he was showing a sudden disposition to dominate. "Mr. Adair, my mother is paralysed. I do not

think that she'd be conscious of your presence even if I introduced you to her. What good would be gained ? "

" I should prefer to know her."

Miss Dennis hesitated ; then came to a sudden resolve.

" If you prefer to know her you shall. Wait one moment. I'll be back in a moment to take you to her."

The girl went, then presently returned. In her bearing also there was something new ; she looked at him with shining eyes.

" Mr. Adair, I ought to tell you that my mother lives in one room. She has not left her bed for some years, nor spoken a word, nor moved a finger ; I am not even sure that she recognises me. She is just alive, and that is all. I share her room. I live in it, and eat in it, and sleep in it. Now that I have told you will you come and be introduced to my mother ? "

" Nothing, Miss Dennis, could give me greater pleasure."

The girl led the way to a room at the back of the house, a good-sized apartment, not uncomfortable, though it contained two beds and the furniture of a sitting-room besides. In one corner was one of those numerous kinds of bedsteads which nowadays are made for the incurable. Miss Dennis led him straight to it.

" Mr. Adair, this is my mother. Mother, this is Mr. Adair, our lodger, to whom we are indebted in very many ways."

The girl spoke with a strange sort of heat. Adair did not know what to make of her. On the bedstead

by which he was standing a form was outlined under the clothes; a strange face was turned up towards him—whether it belonged to a man or a woman it would not have been easy for a stranger to determine. It was the face of one who, though still living, was already worse than dead. Obviously, it would have been absurd to have attempted to address its owner; to have done so would have been as though he mocked. He stood silent, conscious of a sudden, queer something which was almost shame. The girl spoke again.

"Now you know my mother, and my mother knows you. Are you satisfied, Mr. Adair?"

"If you will come back with me to the sitting-room I will tell you, Miss Dennis. I feel that here I am an intruder."

"Here I am not an intruder; in this room I live, and move, and have my being. I would rather not return to your room, nor is there anything which you can have to say to me that I wish to hear."

"You'll have to hear all the same, Miss Dennis. My position in this house gives me a title to say what I have to say; and you will have to hear; that is your plain and simple duty. Permit me to open the door for you."

He stood, holding the door open, motioning her towards it with an inviting hand. She bit her lips, her cheeks were flushed, a mutinous light was in her eyes, but when she saw his, something passed from him to her so that she did his bidding. She went through the open door and returned with him to his sitting-room.

CHAPTER XVI.

VISITORS.

WHEN they were back in the sitting-room the gentleman advanced a chair towards the lady.

"Sit down," he said. If he was curt the lady was not less so.

"Thank you, I'd rather stand."

"And I would rather you sat." He looked at her, and she sat. He moved to the other side of the room. "As I told you just now, Miss Dennis, I wish to come to some understanding with you on the subject of what I will call the domestic arrangements."

"I'm sorry to hear they're not to your taste, Mr. Adair."

"You have just done me the honour to introduce me to your mother, Miss Dennis."

"Then doesn't that make it clear to you why the arrangements are what they are?"

Although she spoke so quietly passion seemed to ring in the lady's voice.

"On the contrary, it is plainer to me than ever how essential it is that the domestic arrangements should be changed."

"You forget, Mr. Adair, that you are speaking of my mother's house. If you are not comfortable, you have only to go."

"I am comfortable, and I do not propose to go; but I do intend that things shall be altered. In the first place, I wish you to keep a cook."

"You wish me! Until this morning I had no idea that you found my attempts at cooking so little to your taste."

"I do not delude myself for a moment, with any notion that the average cooks can perform the miracles you have done. I have never tasted more exquisitely prepared food than you have set before me. But all the same, I do not intend that you shall do the cooking for me any longer. I wish you to engage a common cook."

"You appear to have gone with your grievances to Mrs. Bishop Guy; but I do not think it was necessary that you should have sent her here to issue, on your behalf, the command which it is quite clear you could give yourself, as you are doing."

"I went to Mrs. Bishop Guy because I dare not go to you. That's frank, Miss Dennis."

"I have heard that already, from her; she could be as frank as you are, being, I suppose, instructed by you. She told me that I bullied you. Did you instruct her to tell me that?"

The gentleman smiled, but the lady looked very far from smiling.

"I did not even request her to say anything like that, Miss Dennis; but the fact remains that I have wished to go with you into this matter over and over again, but I've never dared. Whenever I

began, you—I can't help saying—you choked me off."

"And I mean to—as you put it—choke you off now."

"Pardon me, but now I have brought myself to the sticking point I don't mean to be choked off." The girl had risen. "Will you kindly resume your seat, Miss Dennis; but whether you do or do not you are going to listen to what I have to say. You are one of the most unreasonable persons I ever met; you have no notion what I have suffered on your account."

"Suffered on my account. You? What have you suffered?"

"All sorts of things in all kinds of ways. I have more money than I know what to do with. I want to be comfortable; I want those about me to be comfortable. As matters have stood we have neither of us been comfortable. It is positive pain to me to see you work as you have been doing. I have not slept at nights because of the shame I felt at the thought of your being my servant—you, a lady, a delicate, refined, well-bred, highly-educated girl! And you go on your knees to scrub floors for me. I'd far rather go on my knees to scrub floors for you, and that's a solid fact. And you wait on me at table, hand and foot; you prepare my food; you cook it and serve it; you wash my plates and dishes; there is no menial task which you don't perform for me. Miss Dennis, won't you listen to reason? You wish to let lodgings—well, I'm prepared to take them, only I don't want to continue to suffer what I have done. Why won't you have a proper staff of servants? I'm prepared to pay for

them. I'm prepared to become your paying guest, and to pay you any reasonable sum you like—five, six, seven hundred pounds a year, on the condition that you provide the proper staff of servants. Why should you object to my having what I want if you don't lose by it ? "

" I see your point of view—why should I ? "

While the gentleman had been indulging in such a flow of language, the girl had stood listening with the inscrutable something on her face, and in her eyes, which affected him more than any words could have done. He did his best to struggle against the feeling with which her attitude filled him that he was behaving to her like a brute.

" If you do see my point of view, what objection have you to what I propose ? "

" I do not know that at this moment I have any objections to make, only—you see, Mr. Adair, you do not understand."

" What don't I understand ? I will do my best to understand anything if you will give me the chance."

" I daresay ; but I don't propose to give you the chance. You talk about your suffering. It's very good of you to suffer when you think of my scrubbing the floors, and cooking the meals, but you do not suffer so much as I do from what I am beginning to regard as your persistent attempts to force yourself into matters which to me are secret, and sacred, and which I mean to keep inviolate. I would sooner lose you as a lodger than take you into my confidence."

" What should you do if you did ? Take another ? How would you be better off if you did, Miss Dennis ? "

"I cannot tell you what I should do; but I will tell you this. I have only kept you as a lodger because I do not wish my mother to be turned out into the street. So long as she lives I must always be at her side, so I let lodgings. When she dies I will let lodgings no longer. I will try some other way of earning a living. I am conscious of what I owe you, and there could not be a better lodger than you are; but—one can pay too dearly even for the best. It seems to me that that is what you're trying to make me do. Am I to understand, Mr. Adair, that if I do not agree to alter what you call the domestic arrangements you will give me a week's notice, or perhaps pay a week's rent and go without any notice at all? When I say that, I am not for a moment forgetting that the contents of the house are yours, and that you have the right at any time to bring a van to the door and cart them away. If I can't accede to your proposal, how is it going to be? I want to understand where I am?"

Mr. Adair had turned his face away—as he had done at a critical point of his interview with John Harper at the Colossus Hotel, he was trifling with some ornaments which were on the mantelpiece. He spoke very gently.

"I leave the matter in your hands, Miss Dennis. You have heard me—and I have heard you. If you see your way to entertaining my proposal—well, if you don't—then, also well. I hope that, in either event, you will allow me to remain as your lodger."

As the girl was turning to leave the room he said to her:

"By the way, Miss Dennis, I shall not be in to dinner."

She faced round. "You told me you would be. Are you going out because of what has—happened? I have your dinner nearly prepared; and in spite of what you suffer—it gives me pleasure to cook for you."

"Is that so?" He glanced at her. "Then—then—I shall be in." When she had gone he said to himself: "What is there in that girl's eyes which, when I look at them, makes me feel such an utter fool? I never met anyone before whom I found it so difficult to look straight in the face. What the reason is beats me."

Miss Dennis, having returned to the back room, in which the figure was outlined under the bedclothes, kept repeating to herself, over and over again, one sentence:

"If I could only tell him! If I could only tell him! If I could only tell him!"

The six words were persistently shaping themselves in her brain; while she was cooking they were there; while she was taking in the dinner; while she was clearing the table; when she was back again in her own apartment. They obsessed her so completely that at last, sitting, leaning her elbows on a table, she hid her face in her hands, as if, in that way, she hoped to be able to shut them out.

It was whilst she was in that position that a slight sound reached her ear; it was the sound of a faint whistle, so faint that it could only have been audible in the complete silence which reigned. She heard it on the instant; as she heard she started, took her elbows from the table, her face from her hands, and sat up stark and rigid. The sound came again,

even fainter than before. She rose slowly to her feet, and moving as if she were about to do something which she hated, she went to a door at the back, which she unlocked, unbolted, and unbarred. The instant the door was open a figure slipped through—the figure of a man. The moment he was in she closed the door—would have made it fast again had not the newcomer stopped her.

"Don't do that, Gordon is coming?"

"Is he?" The girl seemed to catch her breath as she asked the question, "When?"

"How can I tell you? I only know he's coming—if he can."

The pair passed into the room in which was the figure under the bedclothes.

"Is he in?"

"He is."

"I thought he was. I saw there was a light in his room."

"I believe he's going out."

"I wish he'd be quick and do it. The feeling that he's in the house always gives me the jumps."

Hitherto the man had worn a soft cloth cap; now, taking it off, he threw it on to a table. He was a young man, a few years older than the girl, with refined features, bold eyes, short black hair. He was not badly dressed in a suit of grey tweed, with a small, dark green tie. There was a restlessness about him which suggested a mind which was ill at ease. His eyes seemed to be in all directions at once, his ears always wide open. He glanced towards the bedstead in the corner.

"Same as usual?" He asked the question beneath his breath; everything the two said to each

other was spoken in whispers, as if they were fearful of being overheard.

"Exactly! She is always the same; she never changes."

The young man, placing himself on the chair which the girl had lately occupied, stretched out his legs in front of him, thrust his hands into his trousers pockets, and looked up at her with a quizzical gleam in his fine eyes.

"Got any money?"

"I have not. Where am I likely to get money?"

"From him." He nodded his head towards the wall, on the other side of which was Adair's sitting-room. The girl shivered.

"Thank you! I suppose it amuses you to talk like that. I wish it didn't."

"As a matter of fact, it doesn't; but when the devil drives needs must. I'm stony; dead broke—we all are."

"Don't talk to me about your friends, please."

"Gordon's as stony as I am; he's my friend, and I take it he's by way of being a friend of yours." The girl was silent. "Isn't he? You're changing, Win! Your maidenly nature is being transformed. Each time I see you I realise more clearly that you're not the girl you used to be, especially where Gordon is concerned."

"Has nothing happened to change me? Could anyone go through what I have and remain unchanged? Is such a thing possible?" She added, after she had paused and he had stayed still: "Do you imagine that you have not changed?".

"What a question!" He looked down at his boots as if he found them an amusing study. "When

I think of what I was, and what I am, and what I propose to be—I used to lie awake at nights and dream of being Prime Minister, or the equivalent of that sometimes uncomfortable honour. Think of it—me, Prime Minister—round every street corner I expect to find a policeman who's waiting for me."

"Charlie! What have you been doing now? Is that true? Are you afraid of a policeman?"

"I don't know that you choose quite the correct word. I'm not conscious of being 'afraid' of anything; but since I've hardly earned an honest penny in my life I wonder how you suppose I manage to live?"

"I dare not think. Charlie, why can't you find honest work to do like other men?"

"Where am I going to begin to look for it, with my record? I thought about starting a bucket-shop with the assistance of a few friends, but even that requires capital, and I've told you I'm stony. The world has used me badly; I am going to bleed the world."

"What nonsense you talk! As if what you call the world won't crush you out of existence; as if you and your sort have a chance against it?"

"I'm afraid we haven't. I'm sorry to admit it."

"Charlie, if I found you work, would you do it?"

"What kind of work?" He eyed her with his critical gaze. "I don't know, Winnie, that I'm cut out to be a clerk, if that's the sort of work you propose to find me. I could no more sit on a stool for a certain number of hours every day than I could increase the measure of my height by half a dozen inches. Certain sorts of work I could do,

and I'd love to do; but I should never do them now—never! Be under no delusion, sister mine. Besides, where would you propose to find me work?" The girl was silent. "Would you ask the lodger to give me a job in his office—if he has one? He seems to be a man of mystery to you. Do you know any more about him than you did?"

"I don't wish to discuss him with you—and I won't!"

"You'll have to discuss him with me—that's straight. I've got to get money to-night. If I can't get it from anywhere else I'm going to get it from him—or you're going to get it for me."

"Charlie!" Something which was in the young man's tone, almost more than in his words, seemed all at once to cause the blood to recede from her cheeks. He shook his head at her, and smiled.

"It's no use looking at me like that; what I say I mean—I've got to get money from somewhere to-night—and I'm going to!"

"What do you want it for?"

"That's my business. You can just take it from me that I've got to have it."

"How much?"

"As much as I can get."

"Would a sovereign do?"

"A sovereign!" Laughter trickled softly from his lips. "Say a hundred, or even two!"

"Have you come here to get one—two hundred pounds? You must be really mad?"

"I'm not—not a bit. The lodger is a rich man."

"Who told you so? How do you know that?"

"I am capable of putting two and two together. From certain remarks, which you, at various times,

have dropped, I'm of opinion that at any rate he's good for a hundred."

"Charlie, will you—will you go, please?"

"Not without the money. I don't wish to be disagreeable in the very least, but I absolutely couldn't. I tell you, Winnie, I must have at least fifty pounds to-night, and the certainty of more within a day. You—or I—must get it from the lodger. You'd not find it a difficult thing to do—or, if you do, I shan't!"

"Charlie, I don't wish to have a scene with you—I'm not feeling very well."

"You don't look it, my dear."

"So please—please go!"

"Not without the money. Hush! there's someone outside. It's Gordon." As the girl stood listening she went whiter even than before.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE ORIGINAL OF THE PORTRAIT.

THE girl said, under her breath, holding her hand to her side, as if a sudden pain made it difficult for her to speak :

"Don't bring him in here. Take him into the kitchen."

Her brother, getting up from his chair, laughed.

"Stuff! The kitchen! I am going to bring him in here. Why should I take the man you're going to marry into the kitchen?"

The speaker left the room, to reappear presently with a companion who was perhaps some four or five years older than himself. The newcomer had rather a striking personality. He was tall, slight, dark, and when he smiled he showed a most beautiful set of teeth. He smiled as he approached Miss Dennis, hat in hand. When she shrank back, and held her fists tightly clenched behind her, the smile vanished; a curious hardness took its place. There was something hawk-like about him then. As, holding himself very straight, he stood regarding her with half-closed eyes, one almost felt that he was watching for a chance to pounce upon his prey.

Charles Dennis, as if struck by his sister's attitude, half playfully went through a form of introduction.

"My dear Winnie, you don't seem to know the gentleman who stands in front of you; permit me to introduce to you Mr. Gordon Ray."

The person so designated spoke, still holding out his hand to her.

"My dear Winnie, you don't seem disposed to accord me a very hearty welcome."

So far the girl had remained with her eyes cast down; now, raising them, she met his. "Yet I wished to see you."

"Did you? Your manner doesn't seem to suggest it. What have I done now to offend you?"

She went to a chest of drawers which was on one side of the room, and returned, holding something in her fingers she had taken from a shabby leather box which stood on the top of it.

"You gave me this." Ray looked at what she was holding out to him.

"As a slight token of my affection, Winnie."

"Where did you get this brooch before you gave it to me?"

The gentleman raised his eyebrows. "Is it the custom nowadays for a young lady to ask the man who loves her where he got the gift he gave her, to ask it in quite that tone of voice?"

"I ask you, Gordon, where did you get this brooch?"

"And why, my dear Winnie, do you ask me? Whence this curiosity?"

"I ask because I do not believe it was ever yours to give me."

"There's something very queer in your manner, Winnie. Why don't you believe it?"

"Whose crest and monogram is this at the back?"

"I never pretended that the thing was new."

"And whose is the portrait inside?"

"I didn't know there was one. Is there?"

"Gordon, I ask again, where did you get this brooch?"

"My dear Winnie——"

"Don't call me that; you presume."

A shadow seemed to pass over the man's face. "Do I? That's news."

"I wish to have no more to do with you. I do not want you to come to this house again, or ever to see you or speak to you. I am sorry I ever made your acquaintance. I wish it now to cease."

"You talk in a very extraordinary way, Miss Dennis. How long ago is it since you admitted that you loved me?"

"I never loved you, I never pretended that I did. Charlie introduced you as his friend; he told me wonderful stories about you, about the great things that you were going to do for him. At his request, for his sake, I listened to you. I was sorry that I had done so almost directly afterwards. I doubted what Charlie told me all along. I suspected you of being an influence in his life for evil instead of good; I know it now. I have found you out, Mr. Ray. So you will please be so good as to leave this house at once, and never return to it, and take this brooch with you. I regret to say that I wore it once; I seem to have felt its contaminating touch ever since."

Her brother interposed. "What high-falutin'

twaddle are you talking? What's all this fuss about a brooch? Let me look at the thing."

"I prefer to return it to Mr. Ray."

The hawk-faced man took from her fingers the trinket she held out to him; his countenance seemed overshadowed.

"What is the thing?" asked Charlie Dennis.

"That's what I'm wondering myself, my boy. To tell the truth, I don't remember giving the thing to Winnie. Do you say that it contains a portrait? If it does, how do you get at it? I see nothing which suggests anything of the kind. What is there wonderful about the portrait, if there is one? How did you find out about the thing?"

The speaker was holding the trinket close up to his eyes, as if he were looking for a spring.

"I found out from the owner."

"The owner? What the devil do you mean?" The hand which held the brooch suddenly dropped, an ominous expression had come on Mr. Ray's countenance. "What do you mean by 'you found out from the owner'? Who is the owner?"

"He is the gentleman who occupies apartments in this house."

"What! the lodger?" The speaker was Charlie Dennis. "This is getting funny—how do you know the thing belongs to him?"

"Because the portrait which is in the brooch is the portrait of his father."

The two men looked at each other as if they did not understand. Dennis was the first to speak.

"That doesn't sound like a sufficient reason, does it, Ray? It doesn't follow that a brooch which contains a man's portrait necessarily belongs to his

son, or I should be possessed of more extensive property."

Mr. Ray was feeling the brooch with his nicely-pointed fingers.

"I still see nothing to suggest that it does contain a portrait."

"If you will give it to me I will show you."

In the girl's hand the back flew open; the miniature was revealed. Mr. Ray examined it very closely. Young Dennis observed him with laughing eyes—as if from his point of view the whole business was a joke.

"What sort of looking party is this person, Gordon? Does he squint?"

Mr. Ray, having ceased for the moment his examination of the portrait, with knitted brows, stood staring into vacancy.

"I know this face—everybody knows this face—it's a familiar face. Whose is it? What is the name of the gentleman who occupies your apartments?"

"Mr. Martin Adair."

"That sounds like a crib from an old song. You say this is a likeness of his father? Who told you so?"

"He told me so himself."

"I wonder if the man is a liar."

"That I am sure he is not. Mr. Adair is the soul of truth."

"Is he? The paragon! Fancy a man, any man, being the soul of truth—my hat! All I can say is that if his name's Adair, and this is the portrait of his father, there's something funny somewhere; because I'm perfectly certain that the name of our friend in the miniature was nothing like Adair. I

can't get it for the moment, but I'm sure that this man's name was not Adair. It's on the tip of my tongue—I've got it! This is really—droll."

The fashion of Mr. Ray's countenance had changed. He seemed to be endeavouring to solve a knotty problem which had all at once presented itself to his mind. Charlie Dennis asked questions.

"What's up, Gordon? Who is the man? What's at the bottom of this bag of mystery?"

"If Mr. Martin Adair is not a liar—then he is a liar."

"That seems to be cleverly said, but what does it mean?"

"Either he lied when he said that this man was his father, or he lied when he said that his own name was Adair. For a gentleman who is the soul of truth he seems to be in rather an unfortunate position."

"Gordon, what are you driving at? Let's have it, man. Let's look at the brooch. Who is this nice, clean-looking Johnnie?"

"That's a portrait of the Marquis of Staines. Does the name convey nothing to you, Dennis?"

"Staines! Wasn't that the racing Johnnie who came such a cropper?"

"The same. A sort of replica of that portrait, only on a much larger scale, hung in my father's office. The year he won the Derby his portrait was everywhere. You know my father had a good deal to do with racing——"

"Yes, I know." There was a saturnine smile on young Dennis's lips.

"I remember it hanging in his office for years. I suppose that's how it came to impress itself on my

memory. My word!—there's another thing!" Again Mr. Ray's countenance suddenly changed. "Dennis, we're—we're on to something."

"Then I hope it's something good." Dennis was looking at the miniature. "He was not bad-looking, if this is like him."

"That must have been painted when he was a young man. He died in 1890. I believe he was nearly as old as the century. I had particular reasons for knowing something about the Staines family—the whole thing comes back to me. He had two wives, some said three. By the first he had one son; he married the second Marchioness of Staines when he was quite an old man—he had a son by her. The whole Staines family lived hard. The old man ate money; his eldest son in that respect was a chip of the old block; his younger son was worse still. I could tell you some tales about that Marquis of Staines and his two sons—I've heard a few. The old man died, as I said, in 1890, full of years and dishonour. His second wife was then not an old woman; her son was not then of age, but he was already up to the ears in debt. His father left him nothing. He had nothing to leave. His mother had a little money, the pair of them managed to scrape along on that. In 1901 I was junior clerk to a firm of solicitors who did a good deal of business for the Marquis of Staines. I have some sort of recollection of Lord Maurice Ashurst—that was the name of the old man's second son. He used to come sometimes to the office—I believe generally in the hope of raising money upon something. I know he seemed to me to be an awful swell. He carried himself with an air, was rather good-looking, and tremendously tall.

He was well over six foot. I'm not short, but I was a pigmy compared to him. What's the matter, Winnie? Has anything upset you?"

The girl had sat down on a chair with a suddenness which suggested that for some cause she was unable to continue standing.

"There's nothing wrong with me; only—as I told you—I'm not feeling very well to-night. Go on!"

"You seem to be interested in my story."

"I'm only wondering what it's all leading to."

"Your curiosity shall be presently gratified. Ten years ago, or thereabouts, there came another crisis in the history of the Staines family, worse than any that had gone before. A gentleman who lent money at sixty per cent. and upwards—I forget his name—but I know it was generally upwards, had bills in his possession which he had received from Lord Maurice Ashurst, and which turned out to be forgeries. There was a pretty to-do. The Staines family went smash. His brother, the present Marquis, made an arrangement with his creditors; I believe that to-day he is living somewhere abroad on twopence a year. I fancy that what money he had went in covering his brother. The young gentleman's mother died—her son had killed her. The best of it was that a young woman, to whom my Lord Maurice had been engaged, went bust with the family which she had hoped shortly to enter. The tale was that my Lord Maurice proposed to marry her for her cash, and without waiting for the actual ceremony, had got rid of all she had in a manner at which the Law looked askance. He disappeared. Not very long ago I met a man who used to sit at the next desk to mine. He told me

that he had seen Lord Maurice Ashurst driving a cab—a hansom. He was quite sure that it was his lordship. If so, perhaps since then he has fallen lower still, as hansoms, as a means of earning a livelihood, are practically extinct. Dennis, let me look at that brooch again."

The younger man gave it to him. Mr. Ray examined it closely, inside and out, with a queer gleam in his keen eyes.

"Fancy me giving you this, Winnie, without having the faintest notion of all that it conveyed. The portrait is certainly the portrait of the late Marquis of Staines, of that I'm certain, and what's more, here's a crest and monogram at the back which makes it surer still. The monogram is H. N. The second Marchioness of Staines was a Nowell—before marriage she was Harriet Nowell—I have reasons for knowing that. Apparently, this brooch was her own personal property. I've a sort of idea that a lot of jewellery was given to her by her father, on her marriage, to be passed on to her children as heirlooms. You see, the Staines jewels went to the elder son. Don't you think, Miss Dennis, that this is quite a romance?"

"I'm wondering how much of it is fact, and how much fiction."

The girl seemed to speak with reluctance, as if she were positively ill. Mr. Ray, his hawk-like points more obvious than ever, was all on the alert, as if eager for the moment in which he could pounce and strike.

"That's a point, Miss Dennis, which, in part, may quickly be determined. Don't you see what all I've been telling you comes to? You're quick enough as a rule."

"Don't I tell you I'm feeling ill? I wish, Charlie, you would ask your friend to go."

Her brother laughed at her.

"I wish, Winnie, you wouldn't keep on talking nonsense. I'm sorry you're not well, but we're neither of us going—at least, just yet."

When the young man stopped, Mr. Ray continued.

"What it all comes to, my dear Miss Dennis—since I am no longer to call you my dear Winnie—is this. The gentleman who occupies your apartments tells you that the miniature in this brooch is a portrait of his father. He even claims the brooch as his own. Then, in that case, doesn't it look very much as if the paragon whom you consider to be the soul of truth was Lord Maurice Ashurst, the missing forger? If so, no wonder he prefers to make himself known to you as Mr. Martin Adair."

"Of one thing I am assured, Mr. Ray, that Mr. Martin Adair is not only the soul of truth, but also the soul of honour."

"Your instinct tells you?"

"My instinct tells me; just as it told me something quite different of you. In both instances it was right."

"You think that Mr. Martin Adair is not Lord Maurice Ashurst?"

"On that point I think nothing. I only know that if he is, he has a good and sufficient reason for having dropped his own name, and that he is not the sort of character you suggest. On that I am prepared to stake my life."

"You seem suddenly to have recovered, Miss Dennis."

The girl was standing up, and was facing him

with new life on her cheeks and in her eyes—in her whole bearing.

"You have acted on me as a tonic, Mr. Ray. When such a person as you sets himself to malign one in whom I have complete trust his malice braces me up."

"My hat! Now I begin to understand why you would rather I no longer addressed you as 'my dear Winnie.' Has the soul of truth got so far as that?"

The girl turned to her brother:

"Charlie, will you let your—acquaintance—insult your sister?"

"You start by insulting him; it seems to me that it's six for one and half a dozen for the other. I don't mind telling you, Winnie, that I think his suggestion is justified. You stand up for the lodger in a way that I don't like. I may tell you that I've not the slightest doubt that he's Lord Maurice Ashurst. I have never mentioned to you, Ray, that the last time I was here I had to masquerade as a woman. Certain gentlemen were showing such interest in my movements that a disguise seemed advisable, so I put on petticoats. You should have seen the fuss Winnie made when I turned up here as a dear, sweet lady."

"I don't know why Miss Dennis should make a fuss, I've always thought that you would make an excellent woman."

"So I do, and I did. I looked the part, and I played it to perfection; but that didn't keep Winnie from making a fuss. You can make a fuss about trifles, Winnie, can't you? When I left I was in a bit of a hurry. As I was going out of the garden gate a party was just starting to come through it.

I never expected to see a soul, so I was taken completely aback. When he took off his hat and began to be nice I forgot my character entirely; I got him one with my left and another with my right, and I left him gaping."

The girl's thoughts suddenly flew back to the morning on which she had noticed Martin Adair's lip was cut.

"Do you mean that you struck him?" It was she who put the question.

"I do!—two quite pretty blows. But this is the point, Gordon; you say you recollect Lord Maurice Ashurst as being tall, even beyond the ordinary tall man?"

"I don't think I exaggerate when I say that he was probably six feet four or five."

"That was about the height of the man I met at the gate—I had to reach up. Winnie, is the lodger uncommonly tall?"

"What has Mr. Adair got to do with you, Charlie, or with Mr. Ray?"

"Look at the way you talk to me, Winnie—the way you glare! Is the lodger more to you than your own brother? Is it strange that Ray should have suggested what he did? I have no doubt that you're perfectly right, Gordon, and that the pseudonymous Martin Adair is the forger Maurice Ashurst. Clearly that's what Winnie thinks herself; she gives the show away by her attitude."

"Are you two men going? Is it necessary that I should ask you again?"

"No, Winnie, we are not going. You can keep on asking. I told my sister, Ray, when I first came, that I wanted money—that I'm in dire need of

money. Would you mind telling her that you know that to be true?"

"My dear Charlie, I know that you're worse than penniless."

"I told Winnie that I wanted a hundred pounds."

"At least a hundred pounds."

"Yes, I said that I wanted at least a hundred pounds. If she hasn't got the money herself—and I'm quite willing to believe that she hasn't—then I asked her if she would get it for me from the lodger. According to her own showing he has pots full."

"If he has it can't be honestly come by—that's on the face of it."

"Obviously. I don't suppose he has returned the money he has stolen."

"Of that you may be sure. I should have heard of it. The probability is that he has been up to some more of his nefarious tricks. The man must be a dangerous scoundrel, and your sister has been practically in the house alone with him."

"It's a dreadful thought, isn't it, Gordon? If I had had the least notion of what sort of character he really was I should have interfered before. As her brother, I do know that it is my duty to protect my sister—my only sister; just as I am her only brother—and in such dire need. The question is, Winnie, what do you propose to do?"

"I propose to ask you and your friend once more to leave the house."

"And how about your brother's—your only brother's—dire need; with that scoundrel in the next room wallowing in his ill-gotten gains? I have drawn deductions from your demeanour during this

painful interview which make it clear to me that you have only to ask him for the hundred pounds. I want to get them. Are you going to ask him?" Before the girl could answer, the young man suddenly turned. "Gordon, who's that? There's someone outside the window."

Mr. Ray seemed to be uneasy.

"It's probably the Pitcher. I left him in the lane —let's hope that nothing's wrong." A soft whistle came through the window pane. "It's the Pitcher all right. You'd better go and see what's up."

The girl interposed. "Understand, Charlie, I won't have any more of your acquaintances brought into this room."

Her brother looked at her, an unpleasant look upon his handsome face.

"You won't have! You'll have what I choose."

The young man went out of the room. The girl was left alone with Mr. Ray. The man's fingers were fiddling with the brooch; one felt that he was not so much at his ease as he strove to appear. Presently Dennis returned, with a second companion —an undersized, ill-favoured, shabby, hungry-looking individual, who looked as if his habitual dwelling-place was something not much better than the gutter. Dennis was excited.

"Gordon!" he burst out, the moment he was in the room. "Here's a pretty kettle of fish! You hear what the Pitcher's got to say."

The girl moved forward. "I won't have that man——"

Her brother cut her sentence short, speaking with what was almost brutal violence.

"Who cares what you'll have? I've told you

before you're going to have just what I choose. You keep your mouth shut till you're asked to open it. Now, Pitcher, tell him."

The man had a greasy cloth cap on his head. When the girl spoke, taking it off, he began to twist it round and round—speaking in hoarse tones, as if a bad cold had robbed him of his voice.

"I beg the lady's pardon——" Dennis cut him short.

"Never mind the lady; you concern yourself with Mr. Ray—tell him what you told me."

The man did as he was bid.

"It's like this, guv'nor, I was standing on the other side of the road, under the shadow of a tree, when I sees a party come out of this house. I saw him as plainly as I see you—the sight of him gave me quite a start. When he had gone I had to come and tell you."

"What had you to come and tell me?"

"Why, guv'nor,"—the man glanced furtively round; he raised his cap so as to serve as a screen to his lips—"it was the party from Mitre Court; straight it was!"

"The party from Mitre Court? What do you mean?"

"Well, guv'nor, I should think it was pretty plain what I mean—I mean it was the party from Mitre Court—the party as killed old Creed, that's what I mean; and if that isn't plain enough, I don't know what is."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A RECOGNITION.

MR. RAY still seemed as if he did not understand. He looked at the mean little man in front of him as if he were some poor cur whom he was disposed to treat to a beating.

"Didn't I tell you to wait outside and keep your eyes open until I gave you the signal?"

The little man seemed to cower in front of him. "You did," he admitted.

"Then why haven't you waited? What do you mean by leaving your post before I told you?"

"I had to leave it, guv'nor—I had to! Seeing him gave me such a turn that I couldn't have stopped there no longer—not for anything. When he came out of the front door, and down the path, and through the garden gate, and I saw who it was, I felt as if I was going at the knees. Fancy him! I was thinking of him at the moment—I often am. But all the same he was the last person in this world I expected to see, and coming out of this house! Oh, I couldn't have kept on standing still." An idea seemed to enter the speaker's head. "Did

you know that he lived here, either of you? Is that the game?"

It was Mr. Ray who replied—speaking with a sort of cold ferocity.

"No, it's not the game. Are you absolutely certain that the man you saw coming out of this house was our man?"

"Once seen, never forgotten—that's the sort he is. I doubt if there's another man in London what's as tall as he is, to begin with. Can't I see him, standing at that office, looking down at the Mauler a-lying on the floor, and asking me 'Is this your mate?' That was a bit of a shock, I tell you; I expected to find it the other way about—him on the floor and the Mauler looking down. 'He started out to kill me,' he said, 'and now I'm wondering if I've killed him.' And so did I wonder. I never saw such a picture as he had made of the Mauler, and all inside of five minutes. And then you ask me if I'm mistaken when I tell you I've seen him again! And didn't I see him sneaking down the court with his head bent, and his hands held up to his throat, and his cap drawn down over his eyes, after he'd killed old Creed? No, I'm not mistaken. He's just gone stalking down the lane, rigged up to the nines, and I stood there hungry, without so much as the price of a drink on me, and see him go."

The man's earnestness was, in its way, grotesque. The two men and the girl looked at him, and listened; then Mr. Ray moved a little back; he stood erect; he subjected the girl to a curious scrutiny, and he said:

"So this is your paragon." Her brother turned to her angrily:

"Did you know this?"

The girl, standing in front of him with downcast eyes, replied in a scarcely audible whisper: "Did I know what?"

"Did you know who this man was—this—this infernal lodger of yours? Stop this nonsense, Winnie; don't you pretend you're going to faint, because you're not. You hadn't better. I'm beginning to wonder if you're playing it off against me; you shan't have a chance of doing it again if you are. Answer me! Do you know who this man is?"

The girl raised her face and looked him straight in the eyes.

"I know that he is an upright and honourable gentleman—that is enough for me."

"That is not enough for me. You answer my question. Did you know that the fellow whom you call Martin Adair is the fellow who's masquerading as old Creed's heir?"

"What old Creed?"

"Old Creed, the money-lender, and dealer in general securities." He accompanied the last words with a sardonic grin.

"I did not know it."

"Then let me tell you that he is. And you call the creature an honourable gentleman! A forger who only manages to save his skin by sneaking about under another name, and by practising on the credulity of simple-minded and wrong-headed females; a blackguard who has got possession of old Creed's hoards—he alone knows how——"

"After killing him, guv'nor, after killing him—don't forget that! First he does for the old gentleman, then he calls himself his heir."

The interposition came from the individual they called the Pitcher.

"If you're suggesting that Mr. Adair killed Mr. Jerningham Creed——"

"How did you know old Creed's name was Jerningham?"

"I do know." The girl was holding herself straight enough then.

"We don't suggest it—we state it as a fact."

"Then if all your facts are like that one, they're a tissue of lies, which is what I believe them to be. I know that he did not kill Jerningham Creed."

"You know? You speak with a great deal of assurance. You might have killed him yourself. It so happens that we know better. We know he killed him. You see, with us also it's a case of knowing, and I rather fancy you'll find that we have better grounds for knowing than you have."

Mr. Ray laid his hand lightly on the young man's arm.

"Leave all that, Charlie; your sister may be safely left to reconcile what she knows and what she doesn't know with her own conscience. Let's come to business. You say, Pitcher, you saw him go out?"

"He went stalking down the lane at five miles an hour with those long legs of his; directly he turned the corner, I came in to you."

"Then he's out now?"

"He must be, since he hasn't come back."

Ray addressed himself to the young man.

"Which are his rooms?"

"His sitting-room is next to this on the other side of that wall, his bedroom is overhead."

It was probably because of something which she saw pass between the two men that the girl crossed the room, so that when they turned she was standing with her back to the door.

"You are not going into his rooms," she said.

The young man laughed, and glanced at Ray.

"Dear me! Aren't we? And who said we wanted to go into his rooms?"

"Whether you want to or not, you're not going."

"You hear that, Gordon?" The young man was still smiling. "There's a pretty sister for you! What are we to do with her?"

Ignoring the young man, Gordon Ray addressed his reply to his sister.

"Miss Dennis, the man you call Adair, and whose name is not Adair, is the biggest scoundrel in London."

"You say that, do you?" There was biting significance in the girl's tone; there was still more in the way in which she looked at him.

"I say it; and, as you so kindly hint, I am a good judge of scoundrels. This man—your friend Adair——"

"I should be proud indeed if I thought that he would let me call him friend."

"That's very sweet of you. I was about to remark, that this man whom you would so dearly like to call your friend, is in possession of certain valuable property of ours——"

"I don't believe it. You never had any valuable property, either of you." So far as comment went, he let her interruption go unheeded.

"—which we have made several efforts to regain. We have endeavoured to lay the facts before him,

to appeal to his sense of honour, which you esteem so highly——"

"No more highly than it deserves."

"So far, everything we have done has been in vain. He still retains our property. And, as I told you, it is worth a great deal of money."

"And I tell you that, in that case, I am sure it was never yours. How could either of you come honestly into the possession of property worth a great deal of money?"

"I'm not going to enter into a discussion with you, Miss Dennis. It is enough that he has what belongs to us, that we want it, that we mean to have it."

"Then get it—if you can; but since even you are not likely to pretend that anything of yours is in this house, and as Mr. Adair's landlady I am responsible for the safe custody of what Mr. Adair has in the rooms for which he pays me rent, I will take care that you don't take advantage of his absence to force your way into his private apartments."

Mr. Ray looked at the girl, then turned to her brother.

"You hear what your sister says? What are we to do? I want to run the rule over what that fellow has in his rooms, and I'm going to do it; perhaps you'll explain that to your sister."

"And I tell you that you shall do nothing of the kind!"

The girl's scorn was almost tragic, as she stood confronting him—erect, white-faced, hot-eyed, her back against the door. Ray motioned to her with a little gesture of his hands; he again spoke to her brother.

"You hear? Are you going to deal with her, or must I? I tell you I'm going to look through that man's things; we mayn't have such a chance again. He's done us—now we'll do him. Quite possibly we may come on something which will give us the whip-hand of him, and make him the under-dog. As time is precious—he may return at any moment—are you going to invite your sister to move away from that door, or must I?"

Young Dennis, who had been observing his sister steadily, moved close to her, menace in his air.

"Winnie, come away from that door!"

"I shall not." The girl, suddenly turning, caught at the key in the lock. In an instant her brother had gripped her wrists. "Don't touch me!" she screamed. "Charlie, take your hands off! I'm going to lock this door."

"You're not—don't think it! Leave go of that key! Leave go!"

"You coward! Charlie, you're a coward!"

The brother and sister struggled. She clung to the handle of the key, which she strove to turn in the lock. He did his best to drag her away. Suddenly he caught her round the waist, and, putting forth all his strength, not only forced her to loose her hold, but sent her spinning round till, stumbling over a chair, she went crashing with it to the floor. The force of her fall seemed to shake the house; it even caused what appeared to them to be something very like a miracle. The figure outlined beneath the bedclothes moved; there came a strange sound from the bed; the figure raised itself.

"Mother!" cried the girl.

"What's happened to her?" asked her brother,

staring as if the bed contained a ghost, which, recalled to life, was about to take its walks abroad.

To Gordon Ray the restoration to sentient being of the mother of this brother and sister who contended together conveyed no meaning. It merely offered him the opportunity he sought. The door being left unguarded, he turned the handle, and in an instant was out of the room, the miserable being, whom he had addressed as the Pitcher, following close at his heels. Realising what his action meant, Charles Dennis went quickly after him. The girl seemed in two minds what to do; then she turned to the bed. As she did so, she heard the door of Mr. Adair's sitting-room thrown roughly open, and the tumultuous entry of the three men. Again her impulse was to prevent their felonious intentions. She turned from the bed towards the door. It seemed as if she were about to follow them out of the room; she even got so far as the passage, when she was stayed by another sound. She heard a latchkey being inserted in a lock; the street door opened; Martin Adair came into the hall. At sight of him she reeled; but for the supporting wall she might have fallen again.

"Thank God," she said, "you have come!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE LODGER INTERVENES.

THE three men were too occupied with what they possibly would have described as "running the rule" over the lodger's possessions, to notice what was taking place in the hall. There was a green leather desk on a side-table; they removed it to the table in the centre. Ray and Dennis were bending over it; the Pitcher was looking on.

"A chisel would be the best way into this." The speaker was Gordon Ray. He took a small leather case from the hip-pocket of his trousers, and from the case three pieces of steel, which, fitting into each other, became a sort of miniature crowbar. It was done in two or three seconds. He was about to use this tool to prise the desk open when a voice inquired:

"May I ask, gentlemen, what you're doing with that desk?"

The three men were taken aback; when they perceived who the speaker was, their attitudes suggested a variety of emotions. Charles Dennis stood staring at him sullen-faced; Ray, the sharp edge of his tool still in actual contact with the desk, scarcely moved; the Pitcher stood in shambling

confusion, seeming to have visibly decreased in size. The girl, not altogether hidden by Adair's tall figure, was visible in the hall beyond. As if desiring to smooth matters over, she said, in tones which faltered :

" I don't think they have done much harm. I asked them not to go into your room—and they haven't had time."

" Those last words of yours, Miss Dennis, possibly constitute a saving clause—they haven't had time. Good evening, gentlemen ! "

He went a little farther into the room.

" Good evening, Lord Maurice Ashurst."

The greeting came from Gordon Ray. He still stooped over the desk, apparently unashamed, seeming disposed to continue his attempt to prise it open. Adair observed him, with a characteristic smile lighting up his whole face. If the greeting was unexpected, he showed no signs of surprise. He merely remarked :

" I think, sir, I have had the pleasure of seeing you before."

" I have certainly seen you before, Lord Maurice Ashurst, although it was no pleasure, and quite appreciate the reasons which induced you, dropping your own mired name, to call yourself Martin Adair."

Mr. Adair addressed the girl with a courteous deference which never seemed to fail him.

" If you'll excuse me, Miss Dennis, I should like to have a few moments alone with these three gentlemen."

" Don't you make any mistake about it, my lad ; she knows all about you—we've taken care of that. She knows the kind of fraud you are."

The speaker, this time, was Charles Dennis. One felt that his intention was to cover his real uneasiness with a veneer of bluster. Adair closed the door; then his glance rested on the Pitcher.

"I said three gentlemen—I think, after all, I can dispense with one of you and talk things over with the remaining two." He addressed the Pitcher. "You are the man who acted as cover to your friend the Mauler. Is he still alive?" The little man shuffled; he was obviously distressed.

"No thanks to you if he is," he answered. "There was a time when it looked as if you'd have to swing for him."

"One doesn't have to what you call 'swing' for creatures like that, any more than one would have to swing for you if you dropped out. Your friends may not be particular, but I find it difficult to breathe in a room the air of which is contaminated by your presence. Permit me to call your attention to the door." He held it wide open. "Go through this door, across that hall, out into the street, and out of the street back to the foulness in which you are at home. If in a few minutes I find you in the neighbourhood of this house, you'll have the same experience as your friend the Mauler; only, as you obviously lack his stamina, you may suffer even worse than he did. You understand? Go!"

The Pitcher went, without an attempt at remonstrance. Even his friends said nothing. As if glad of the chance, he bolted through the door, across the hall, out of the house. He shut the hall door behind him with a bang. They heard his steps along the path. Then a husky voice shouted: "Who killed old Creed?" In the silence which followed they

heard the Pitcher, without waiting for an answer to his own question, running down the lane as fast as his feet would carry him.

Then Mr. Adair, after quietly closing the sitting-room door, regarded his uninvited guests with a smile.

"Well, gentlemen, what have you to say to me?"

For a moment the pair said nothing; then young Dennis blustered:

"You've got what belongs to us, you know perfectly well. If you'd handed it over, or the coin, we shouldn't be here. You may come the thief with a high hand over others, but you're not going to do it with us, so don't you make any mistake, my Lord Maurice Ashurst, alias Martin Adair."

The young man's violence left Adair cold. He was suavity itself.

"You are Mr. Charles Dennis. I have your portrait."

The young man started.

"What do you mean by you've got my portrait?"

"To be accurate, I have three portraits of you. Neither is good as an example of the photographic art—which they are not meant to be; but in each the likeness is unmistakable. I also have some biographical notes of you, Mr. Charlie Dennis; it appears that you are an unconvicted felon. Besides minor matters, you have been concerned in at least four big jewel robberies. On each occasion you brought your booty to Mr. Jerningham Creed. Three times you received cash for it; on the fourth occasion he died before he could pay what, as a thief, was due to you. I believe it is the stolen property which you brought to him on that fourth

occasion to which you refer when you say that I have what belongs to you. You are mistaken. In the first place the act of stealing conveys no title; in the second, what you stole has been restored to the owner. The owner acknowledged its receipt only a day or two ago. I shall be happy to show you that acknowledgment whenever you choose, or even, if you doubt its authenticity, to introduce you to the owner. I think, Mr. Dennis, that concludes what I have to say to you, and probably also what you have to say to me. Since accounts are settled between us, that being so, don't you think you might follow your malodorous friend, and, without further intruding on your sister, go?"

When Adair stopped, the young man kept still. What he had just heard seemed to have taken the stiffness out of his joints. He glowered at the speaker with eyes in which were both rage and fear. Turning to his friend, he moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue, and said:

"You hear what he says?"

Ray's reply was curt: "I heard."

"Do you—do you believe it?" Mr. Adair interposed. "With what your friend believes I am not at the moment concerned; as for yourself, I will give you every proof of the correctness of my statement you may require, only the matter may become awkward if you require me to do that. I do not wish to compound a felony, nor, on the other hand, do I care to invite the interference of the police."

"That I can quite believe—for your own sake. You might find them troublesome to you." The young man spoke as if he snarled.

"I won't pretend to misunderstand you; I will merely remark, Mr. Dennis, that you talk of what you know nothing. Is there anything else which you wish to say before you go? If so, consider well before you say it—remembering that I know a great deal about you, and that you know very little about me."

"Except that you're——"

"Yes—except that I'm what?" Young Dennis had left his sentence unfinished when he caught the other's glance; he seemed reluctant to finish it, even when invited. Instead, he returned to his former tone of bluster.

"Never mind. I don't want to bandy words with you. Only I'll have you to know this—that this house belongs to my mother, who is an invalid; so if you think you can take advantage of my sister——"

"Stop, Mr. Dennis, if you please! I think that the subject of your sister is one which you had better let alone—you soil her name by allowing it to pass your lips. I've had enough of you, for the present—a little of you goes a long way. Leave my room, sir, and the house!"

Hesitant, the young man turned again to his friend. "Shall I go?"

There was a slight movement of raised eyebrows, as if he sneered.

"What a question to ask me." One could see the young man wince.

"Are you going to stay?" The young man's tone was savage. "I don't see what good you're going to do if you do."

"Perhaps not—perhaps there's a good deal that you don't see."

"Is that meant for—— Ray, what do you mean by that?"

"Mr. Dennis, I'm waiting. Your friend is going to stay till I have said a few words to him. I wish to be alone with him. Be so good as to leave us together."

Nothing could have been suaver than Adair's tone, and, so far as the young man was concerned, nothing could have had a more persuasive effect.

"You needn't think I want to stop—and you needn't think either that I'm going because you want me to." Charles Dennis strode into the hall. When he already had the open front door in his hand he shot a lost arrow. "I might be able to put up with a blackguard, masquerading forger, but I can't breathe in the same room as a murderer, and that's why I'm going."

Whatever might have been the reason, the young gentleman went, banging the door behind him even louder than the Pitcher had done. Martin Adair, gently closing the door of his sitting-room, turned to Mr. Gordon Ray with so easy a smile that one wondered if Charles Dennis's last pointed remark had been inaudible.

"Now, Mr. Ray, I have to deal with you."

"And with this." This was a revolver which Mr. Ray had all at once produced from his jacket pocket.

Adair shook his head, still smiling.

"No, Mr. Ray, not with that. I thought that you were wise enough to be aware that toys were for children—not for men."

"You'll find that this is no toy—if you don't watch it."

"Is that so? Mr. Ray, I have no less than

seven portraits of you. If you only knew how much that means."

"As it happens, I don't. For all I care, you can have seventy."

"Those seven portraits would represent seven convictions. Each time one was taken you were in the act of committing a crime. I have full particulars of each of those crimes in black and white."

"So you may have! How about the crime you committed when you forged certain names on certain papers? Do you think I don't remember you? I have only got to speak a few words in certain quarters, and you'll sleep in gaol to-night—and you'll keep on sleeping there for years."

"Speak your words, Mr. Ray. As I said to the young gentleman who has just gone—you talk about what you know nothing."

"Oh, don't I? I suppose you deny that you're Maurice Ashurst. I could tell you as much of your history as you know yourself. Don't know what I'm talking about, don't I?"

"No, Mr. Ray, you do not; you may think you do, but you don't. I remember you. I've a memory for faces; I've been searching it since I came into the room. I remember where I saw your face before I saw it in those seven portraits. You were a clerk in the office of Messrs. King, Haygrove, and Banner, by whom you were so unfortunate as to be prosecuted for embezzlement, for which, being found guilty, you were sentenced to six months' hard labour. Oh, yes, I remember you, Mr. Ray—although then your name was not Ray!"

"I never pretended to be a model character, but

I never committed forgery, and I never killed a man. There's someone in London who as good as saw you kill old Creed. And at this moment you are doing yourself like a fighting cock on stolen goods; yet you stand there like a varnished saint and pass yourself off as if you were something superior in plaster gods, and you have the cheek to talk to me as if I were a sort of character who isn't fit to black your boots. We've all got our little weaknesses, Lord Maurice Ashurst, but I'm not a damned hypocrite and you are. Now, let's come to business. I conveyed—we'll call it conveyed—with some friends of mine, Lady Barnes's emeralds, and other little trinkets of hers. We took a lot of trouble over that job—we earned them. Then we took them to Creed and we valued them at fifteen hundred pounds—they cost someone more than fifteen thousand. Creed was willing to give us the money—he was fair enough in his way, and I've reason to believe that he drew fifteen hundred pounds from the bank in sovereigns for us. We were to have had the money before ten o'clock on the morning of Wednesday, the thirteenth of May. You know what happened on the Tuesday night before, or rather, early the Wednesday morning—you know, no one better. You've got the whole bag of tricks; you must have got hundreds of thousands of pounds' worth of goods which didn't honestly belong even to old Creed and which certainly don't honestly belong to you. You've done it very well. I'm not offering a word of criticism, Lord Maurice Ashurst, but don't you think it's playing a little low down, considering that you're sticking to our emeralds, the fruits of our labour, that you're sticking to our fifteen hundred

sovereigns, which are a drop in the bucket compared to what you've got. From what I know of Creed's little ways, I'm willing to bet a trifle that those fifteen hundred sovereigns were put up for us in a nice little box, with a name outside which I'll mention with the greatest pleasure if you'd like to hear it. You're a clever man, and a strong one, and well plucked—you must have the pluck of the devil—I admit all that ; but compared to you I'm an innocent babe. I'm not afraid of you, though I know murder is looking out at me from your smiling eyes, and I tell you that you're the biggest blackguard, thief, and low-down hound of whom I've ever heard. Now that I have favoured you with a piece of my mind, perhaps you'll let me know if you'll hand me those fifteen hundred sovereigns."

" The eloquence with which you plead your cause almost persuades me, Mr. Ray ; you perhaps did not notice that I told your young friend that the stolen property had been returned to the owner."

" You told him ! Yes, I daresay ! You told his sister that your name was Martin Adair ; tell some other tale to me. Hand over those fifteen hundred sovereigns."

" If you will come to Mitre Court to-morrow morning, Mr. Ray, I will show you the list of jewels which were returned to Lady Barnes, and her acknowledgment of their receipt, together with other details connected with the matter which you may find interesting. If you're not satisfied with the evidence you shall have what you call ' your ' fifteen hundred sovereigns. That is a sporting offer."

" What are you playing at ? "

" All the goods which Jerningham Creed purchased

from the male and female rascals who stole them are being returned to their rightful owners, if living; to their heirs, if dead. In each case the fullest explanations are being given. Mr. Creed left behind him memoranda which lacks nothing in candour. He put down in black and white from whom each lot of goods was purchased, how much he paid, from whom they were stolen, so that the work of restoration is rendered comparatively easy. Those memoranda show that you were one of his regular customers, Mr. Ray. You seem to have been connected with robberies galore; in most of them the police do not seem to have even guessed at the identity of the thieves. I make no comment on the fact, I only state it."

For the first time, as Gordon Ray observed with his keen eyes the smiling man in front of him, a look of uneasiness seemed to come upon his face, as if he were not quite sure what manner of man this was with whom he was dealing. He even gave his doubt expression.

"Either you have a face of brass beyond anything I have ever heard of, or—as a curiosity you take the cake! The more you keep on talking the more I keep on asking myself—what is he playing at? What, for instance, do you think you want with me? I can see you want something—what is it?"

"Now we're coming to the point. What I want with you is something very simple. You gave Miss Dennis a brooch."

"A brooch? What brooch? Who told you I did?"

"I know you did; I needed no telling. How did that brooch come into your possession? That is

what I want from you—that simple little piece of information."

Mr. Ray's thin, keen face seemed to be compressed within its smallest dimensions. It was nearly all nose, brow, and chin.

"Suppose I were to tell you that I bought it at a jeweller's shop in the Strand?"

"I should ask you for the jeweller's name and number. I ought perhaps to disabuse your mind upon one point, Mr. Ray; any information you may give me will not be used to your disadvantage; of that you may be assured."

"Why do you wish to know?"

"For a reason of which I believe you are aware. The brooch was once my mother's. When she died I thought that it was still in her possession. I merely want to trace its after-history."

"I didn't get it from your mother."

"So I imagined."

Mr. Ray's eyes seemed to have grown smaller, with the rest of his face; little of them but the pupils were visible; they were fixed upon the other as if they were two points of light.

"I believe you were once acquainted with Lady Louisa Southworth."

For a moment Adair was silent. A shadow seemed to steal over his face; one felt that in some way the words had hurt him.

"You are so good as to say so, Mr. Ray."

"You and she were once engaged to be married."

The shadow on the other's face grew deeper; his lips tightened.

"What has this to do with the question I asked you, Mr. Ray?"

"You'll find that it has a great deal to do with it when I've got there. When—some one—forged certain names to certain deeds, Lady Louisa Southworth had just turned twenty-one. When the forgery was discovered what money she had went by the board. She might have prosecuted, but she didn't. To show that she was conscious of her indebtedness to Lady Louisa, your mother, when she died, left her all her jewels. Lady Louisa, however, did not long retain them in her possession; shortly after she became their owner they were lost. That brooch was one of them. The rest of the jewels, I take it, are in your possession?"

"By which you mean?"

"They were sold—by the finders—to Jerningham Creed. Haven't you found them among the rest of his hoards? Aren't they part of your inheritance? How about that memorandum-book of which you spoke; aren't they entered, with details about the original owner, the conveyer, the price which was paid, and so on? I thought you said that Creed had a memorandum-book in which all that sort of thing was entered."

"I have come upon the rest of the jewels; as you put it, they are part of my inheritance; they are entered in that memorandum-book; but for once in a way the entry is vague. The articles are enumerated, but there is no mention of owner, seller, or price, which is why I have come to you for information. I also wondered if that brooch was part of the rest."

"It was and it wasn't. She lost it at the same time; but when it came into my hands, I kept it as a sort of perquisite. I kept it—oh, for a good long time, then I made a present of it to a lady."

"You gave it to Miss Dennis?"

"I did. Has she told you?"

"The brooch which you stole from Lady Louisa Southworth you gave to Miss Dennis?"

"Granting that what you say is right, Lord Maurice Ashurst, as regards Lady Louisa, you and I seem to be in the same boat—you robbed her of all her money, I found her jewels. By your showing we are birds of a feather, only she suffered a good deal more at your hands than she did at mine, and I was never engaged to the lady."

"How dare you give a thing you stole to Miss Dennis?"

"How dare I? Come, that's good! Considering the game you've played, to put it mildly, you seem to have had as much courage as I had. I dare give that brooch to Winifred Dennis because I dare—and had a right to give her anything."

"On what grounds? Because you had scraped some sort of blackguard acquaintance with her young scamp of a brother?"

"My dear Lord Maurice Ashurst, Miss Dennis occupied towards me the same position which Lady Louisa Southworth once occupied towards you—she was engaged to be my wife. What's the game? Stop that! Don't you lay a finger ——"

Before Mr. Ray could finish his sentence the other was round the table and on to him. He raised his revolver.

"I'll shoot," he said. Before his words were fully spoken Adair had wrenched the revolver from his hand.

"You'll shoot!" Adair had turned the muzzle of

the weapon towards its original holder. "You'll shoot?" he repeated.

Gordon Ray was agile in his movements; used to tight corners, he prided himself on always being ready for an emergency; on that occasion he found himself in a position in which all his resources availed nothing. His revolver was taken from him as a toy may be snatched from a child; he was bent backwards over the table with fingers about his throat, which he realised would only need to be pressed a little tighter to squeeze the life right out of him. Resistance was out of the question; he could not breathe; a film was forming before his eyes; all the muscles in his body were twitching as if in a sudden convulsion. Then the grip of the fingers relaxed; he slipped off the table, or rolled, he knew not how it was, and lay on the floor an inert mass. Presently a voice said:

"Get up!"

He did not know how or why, but he got up. He felt himself to be unsteady on his feet; his throat seemed still to be compressed; he put up his fingers as if to ease it; with an odd, hazy feeling he looked up at the man in front of him.

"That was a very near thing." He spoke in tones which he knew were not in the least like his own. "Another little squeeze, and you would have killed me."

"If you are ever nearer death, Mr. Ray, you'll never return to life again. I nearly killed you, but I didn't quite, because you dared to say that Miss Dennis was—engaged to a thief like you. Take my advice, never hint at anything of that kind again, lest worse befall you."

Mr. Ray still seemed to be bemused; he still fingered his throat.

"You must be made of steel. I have tried conclusions with some strong men, but never with one like you. Your fingers gripped my throat like —nothing I have ever heard of. In your hands I was like a child; it was a new experience. I shan't forget that grip of yours—never."

"Shall I open the door for you, Mr. Ray, or can you see yourself off the premises? If you are wise you will see yourself; lest, should I have again to touch you, I should use more force than was required."

"That's true—you might. I think I'll take your advice and see myself out into the street. Are you going to give me back my revolver?"

"I am not."

"I've got another in the outer pocket of my jacket—I've got my finger on the trigger now."

There was an explosion. Something happened again to Mr. Ray; in the very moment of the explosion he was picked up, thrown upon the table, a second revolver was taken from the other pocket in his jacket. The weapon was still smoking; there was a hole in the cloth showing where the bullet had gone through; there was also a hole in the wall above Mr. Adair's head—made by the bullet which had been meant for him. Before he had recovered his breath sufficiently to utter a sound, Gordon Ray was being borne from the room, through the passage, out of the front door, along the garden path. When the garden gate was reached he was flung through the air out on to the road. There Mr. Adair left him. He stood for a moment or two to see if he

moved. Since the man continued motionless, he went back along the path, into the house, and closed the door. Then he stood in the passage listening. The house seemed curiously still. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his lips; then passed it across his brow. He returned to his sitting-room door, which stood wide open, hesitated, then passed to the room behind.

"Miss Dennis!"

Although he did not speak loudly, his voice must have been audible to anyone within. When there was no answer he turned the handle and spoke again.

"Miss Dennis!"

When there was still silence, he opened the door and looked into the room. The girl was on the floor in an attitude which was eloquent, her face hidden on the faded eiderdown quilt which covered the bedstead in the corner. He moved a step or two into the room, addressing her a third time.

The girl turned to him a face which was too full of anguish to permit of tears. One doubted if, at first, she recognised him; then, gathering herself together, with wavering action she rose to her feet —and she looked into his eyes. And when he looked into hers, something within him started trembling. After a silence, which he felt himself powerless to break, she whispered:

"Mother is dead!" There was a significance in the way she said it which was beyond his understanding. "She died when I was trying to keep them from going into your room—she moved for the first time for years when Charlie threw me on to the floor. Do you think she knew what he wanted to do?—I hope she didn't!"

The four last words came from her as if they had been a wail of despair. Something happened to the man who was in front of her—something which lifted him out of himself, which he had to obey. Without uttering a word, scarcely knowing what it was he did, he held out his arms to her.

When she saw the gesture the fashion of her countenance was changed. She shrank back, trembling from head to foot as if afraid. Then that something seemed to come to her which had come to him—which she had to obey. She went unsteadily towards him, as if not moving of her own volition, until she had passed between his outstretched arms. They were folded round her.

"Mother is dead!" she wailed.

The relief came to her which comes with tears; sobs shook her as if they would tear her to pieces; and he comforted her as if she were a little child.

CHAPTER XX.

IN MITRE COURT.

JOHN HARPER and Martin Adair were together in the chambers at Mitre Court—in the apartment which Jerningham Creed had used as a storehouse and a sitting-room. Adair was opening one of the metal cases which fitted the divisions in Mr. Creed's steel-lined cupboard with so much nicety. The case being opened, taking out some of the contents, he laid them carefully on the table at which John Harper was seated.

"I have been able to supply the missing entry," he observed.

Harper glanced at him, and then at the articles which he had displayed upon the table. They consisted of a number of trinkets of all sorts. Among them was a necklace which Harper, taking into his hand, felt gently with his fingers.

"Whoever bought your mother her jewels showed a pretty taste, Adair. For instance, these are very nice brilliants in this necklace. It's as pretty a necklace as a lady could want to see."

"I believe my father gave it to her when they were married. That year was one of his lucky ones. I

fancy he did well with cards as well as horses. For that necklace he actually paid ready cash—one of the few occasions in his life on which he paid cash for anything."

"How about the missing entry? Can you really fill in those two or three vacant lines in what is certainly one of the most interesting volumes I ever saw?"

"You can't say, Harper, that you don't know a good deal about me now. You know all about my people, and I think you may have heard of Lady Louisa Southworth."

"I have heard a good deal about her."

"Her association with us was the tragedy of her life." Adair paused. He was walking about the room with his hands in his trousers pockets. He stood and turned towards Harper with a whimsical smile upon his face. "I say with us; there are people who would write it with me—but they would be wrong. It's a complicated story. I knew her almost from the hour she was born; her mother was my mother's friend. Even when she was a baby—her mother was always stopping with my mother—I used to carry her off with me into the woods at home. The two mothers put their heads together: they arrived at conclusions of their own. So when things were worse than ever, and I was a man, an understanding had grown up that Louisa's fortune was to be used to restore our waning glories—I was to marry her. Did you ever care for a woman, Harper?"

Mr. Harper was silent. He glanced at the necklace which he was still holding, then looked up at the tall figure which stood before the window.

"There are questions which, even when I put them to myself, I prefer to leave unanswered."

"So?" Adair laughed. "You've answered mine—and you've doubtless learnt that one may care for a woman in many ways. I cared for Louisa Southworth in one of them. Though I was not keen to marry anyone, I was not indisposed to marry her. Then—things went smash—we went smash, and we smashed her." The speaker resumed his walking about the room. "It was, I think, my blackest hour when I realised that our ruin had involved hers. Everything was so hopeless that at that time it was the wildest kind of nonsense to hope for anything; yet I told myself that, from henceforward, it should be the one object of my existence to make good to Louisa Southworth. And Jerningham Creed has placed it in my power to, at least in one respect, fulfil my dream. It's very extraordinary, Harper, very extraordinary indeed."

"The world, my dear Adair, is on two planets: on the one only the ordinary happens; on the other only the extraordinary; I have passed most of my life on the latter."

"My mother, thinking to make some atonement, gave her jewels to Louisa; some scoundrels stole them from Louisa and sold them to Creed—they are on the table in front of you at the present moment. I shall be able to restore not only the money which she lost, but the jewels as well."

"And you think that will be making good to her?"

"In a measure, yes—so far as a man can."

"I understand that Lady Louisa Southworth is still unmarried."

Adair caught Harper's glance, then, going back

to the window, stood looking through the grimy pane.

"Harper, I am going to be married." The man at the table continued to play with the string of shining stones; he said nothing. Presently Adair went on. "I have discovered another of the ways in which one can care for a woman."

"You are fortunate in being still at an age in which you can make discoveries."

"It seems to me that I have made my discovery rather late; yet, late or early, it's a new world which I've discovered. Don't laugh, it is."

"I'm not likely to laugh at a man who has discovered a new world. I envy him. I doubt if there's a new world for me to discover."

"I thought as you do not so very long ago, but now I'm beginning to wonder if there are not new worlds for all of us to discover. I discovered one when I knocked at the door of a house in Putney; when the door was opened I saw the new world dim on the horizon. I've been getting closer and closer to it ever since, until the other night I got there."

"I wondered what had happened; during the last few days you seem to have grown younger."

"When I've made good to Louisa Southworth I shall feel younger still. It's a comfort to think that there is at least a part of Mr. Jerningham Creed's hoards which I can with some show of honesty call mine."

"My impression is that you'll still be a rich man when you've played your quixotic game for all it's worth. I presume you don't intend to hand over to the Crown what you can't get rid of in any other way."

"I do not. There are a good many things in Creed's collection for which only a Solomon could find an owner. Take these—I suppose there's a good deal of money represented by that little lot?"

Adair, opening another metal case which stood upon the table, lifted out of it three large trays, crowded with a variety of articles which made John Harper's eyes glisten as he placed them in front of him.

"If these were being offered in the open market, and a bid were invited from me, I think I might safely go as far as fifty thousand golden sovereigns."

"And they lack an owner—at least what the legal mind would call an owner."

Harper was turning over what seemed to be a filigree ball studded with precious stones.

"Here's a very pretty thing, who's the owner of this pretty thing? There isn't a stone in all this lot that isn't worth good money. I take it that this comes from Pekin—the Winter Palace; there have been a good many inroads into its treasures lately; these trifles of virtue and bigotry represent about the latest. This was once a decoration on the head of a sort of Joss which was on the pedestal in the Emperor's bedroom—just over his bed. The figure was twelve or fourteen inches high—the whole of it was jewelled like this ball. It was broken into pieces for safe transport; you have all the component parts; they're a small fortune in themselves. You will certainly never be able to restore it to the Winter Palace; at this time of day there is no one there who has the slightest claim to it. Nor can I advise you to treat with Mr. Outerbridge and his friends; their title is such a very sketchy one;

though I fancy you'll have to reckon with them if you won't treat."

"I wonder how many of them there are? I've had to reckon with half a dozen already."

"You're a brave man, Adair. Nothing is so hard to reckon with as gentlemen of their stamp who come from the Far East. I shouldn't wonder if they counted you out yet before they've done."

"I sometimes wonder. A man threw something at me the other night as I was crossing Putney Bridge. It missed me by about a quarter of an inch, struck the stonework and went off with a bang which must have been audible for miles down the river. If that had hit me as intended, I daresay the gentleman who threw it would have been able to drop what was left of me over the parapet into the water. The other morning I opened a packet which came to me through the post. It contained a small metal box. Experience has made me cautious. I only just raised the lid a fraction of an inch, then shut it down again just in time. The box contained some preparation, the fumes of which were calculated to kill in a single whiff; the suggestion of a whiff I got almost knocked me over. As you say, I sometimes wonder if Mr. Outerbridge and his friends won't gather me in before they've done."

"Therefore, I'm not sure that under certain circumstances I shouldn't recommend you to come to some amicable arrangement."

"They want twenty thousand pounds for these relics from Pekin; you don't mean that you'd recommend me to pay it? They'd be no more mine afterwards than before."

"You might return the relics to Mr. Outerbridge."

"In other words, hand back to the thieves what they have stolen."

"Good, honest Britishers once sacked the Winter Palace. I knew an officer, a gentleman, who offered to sell me certain rugs which had strayed, and I bought them. I once bought in a London auction-room a vase which came from the Winter Palace. There's a refinement of meaning in these matters. Men who put articles on the London market which were once in the Winter Palace do not necessarily belong to the category of common thieves. I tell you what—suppose you drop into the background—let me deal with Mr. Outerbridge. You've just discovered a new world; you do not want to be snuffed out because of these things." John Harper laid his hand on one of the trays. "If you don't like my proposition, let me lay the matter before certain gentlemen of my acquaintance, whose characters are without stain or blemish, and let them consider it as a sort of arbitration."

"There's something in that—I don't want to be snuffed out. If Outerbridge and his friends will accept their decision——" Adair's sentence was cut short by the sounding of an electric bell. "The post or a visitor?" He looked at his watch. "I shouldn't be surprised if it's our cinematographic friend. It's about the time he appointed. I'll go and see."

"And I'll come with you. But before you go, I should recommend your putting these few odds and ends away. It mayn't be the man about the cinematograph, and it may be someone who would very much like to get within reach of these. Better remove temptation out of the way."

Laughing, Adair put back the trays into the cases and snapped them to with a noiseless spring, whose secret he had only by chance discovered.

"We needn't trouble to put the cases away; I don't fancy any visitor will get inside them in a hurry—at least, while we are here."

"Put those cases back into the safes. If you're going to let anyone into these chambers, I'm running no risks. You don't know who's on the other side of that door."

"That's true, I don't; and between ourselves, I don't much care."

"That's not the way for a man to talk who has just discovered a new world of the kind you have."

"Isn't it? Perhaps you are right. Harper, you're a sound mentor and a careful man. Here go the cases back into the safes, and we'll shut the doors, so that a stranger won't know that they're there. Hullo, there's the bell again! Whoever is outside seems to be getting a little tired of waiting."

CHAPTER XXI.

MONSIEUR ROLAND.

THE man who stood outside the door when Mr. Adair opened it was not, at least to all appearance, a very formidable personality. He was a little, dapper-looking person, who, the instant the door was opened, removed his hat, and remained standing with it in his hand. One perceived that he was not English.

"I am Monsieur Roland, of Plantin Frères."

Adair glanced at John Harper, who stood close behind him, to serve as a sort of second line of defence should danger threaten—and he smiled. The idea that two men of their build were required to deal efficiently with peril which took the shape of this small gentleman was tolerably absurd. Adair opened the door much wider.

"Come in, Monsieur Roland. I have your letter. I am Martin Adair; this is my friend, John Harper. As I said, I have your letter, but as I explained in my reply, it was rather beyond my comprehension."

Mr. Adair shut the door, the visitor having advanced into the centre of the room, where he stood, still holding his hat with both hands, smiling first at one gentleman and then at the other.

"Mr. Creed is dead?" His accent was French, but his English good.

"Mr. Creed has been dead some time; I am in possession of all that was his."

"And Mr. Latraille, of Messrs. Latraille, Olgano and Company, who occupied the offices below, can you tell me what has become of him? I have been knocking, but I have had no answer."

"Mr. Latraille is also dead. He and Mr. Creed died on the same night."

"Indeed; that is a strange coincidence, is it not? The firm which I represent had two or three transactions with Messrs. Latraille, Olgano and Company, and also one with Mr. Creed. Do you know if the apparatus with which we supplied him was satisfactory?"

"Take a chair, Monsieur Roland." The visitor placed himself on the chair which he was offered, an act which, since the two other men remained standing, made him seem smaller still. "I am scarcely in a position to say whether the apparatus was or was not satisfactory, since, to be candid, I don't even know what apparatus it was which you supplied."

"Is it possible? Did Mr. Creed never speak of it? No? That is strange. Do I understand that you are Mr. Creed's representative?"

"I am his heir, Monsieur Roland; he left me everything of which he died possessed, including, I take it, the apparatus which you supplied—if I only knew what it was."

"That is quite simple; it was a cinematograph."

"A cinematograph? I'm afraid that doesn't seem to me to be so simple as it appears to you. May I

ask if you have any notion what Mr. Creed proposed to do with so unusual an article—for a person in his position—as a cinematograph ? "

" That I cannot tell you ; but, if you'll permit me, I'll explain as far as I am able. You are probably aware that Messrs. Plantin are perhaps the greatest dealers in the world in cinematograph appliances of all sorts and kinds. Mr. Creed wrote to us inquiring if it was possible to have a cinematograph apparatus in a private room. We told him it was quite possible, but that we should like to see the room. I came, and I saw it ; it was this room."

" Why did he want a thing of that kind in here ? "

" He explained that in this room, and in the rooms adjoining, he had many valuables. He said he lived here all alone—especially was he alone at night. He wanted us to make a sort of hiding place in the wall in which could be secreted a lens which would take cinematograph pictures."

" I begin to see method in his madness. Was it you who fitted the camera in the table in the room downstairs ? "

" It was. So you know about that ? You have seen it. Do you know if it was any good ? "

" It was good enough to take one of the most remarkable series of portraits I've ever seen. They are at present in my possession ; you shall see them if you like. They're not wonderful as works of art, but considering the circumstances under which they were taken they are very wonderful indeed. What about the cinematograph ? "

" The idea was that, as with the camera, it should take pictures without the person or persons concerned knowing anything about it—only, of course,

in this case the matter was not so simple. The camera was to take portraits in the daylight, the cinematograph at night. It was to be set in action by a sort of burglar alarm. Anyone forcing his way into the room, either by the window or the door, was to set the machinery in motion—the moment he set foot in the room. Of course, pictures cannot be taken in darkness. Our idea was that the instant the machinery was set in motion a light was to be switched on. By that light a complete series of pictures would be taken of the room, or any person or persons who might be in it, of everything that was done ; so that if, we will say, a burglary took place in this apartment, a complete pictorial record of the whole incident would be left, which could be used as evidence."

"Jerningham Creed was certainly a person of resource. The more I learn of him the more I find to admire. Did you fit up this ingenious apparatus, Monsieur Roland ? "

"We did. At his suggestion we brought workmen from Paris, who carried out the whole affair, so that no hint of what was being done might get abroad. Mr. Creed wished it all to be kept very secret."

"Where did you fix the thing ? "

"There, in that wall ; almost exactly, I should say, where I am pointing."

Twisting round on his seat, Monsieur Roland stretched out his arm towards the wall which faced the windows, and was at right angles, not only with the door which opened on to the staircase, but also with that which led into the private apartments. Martin Adair and John Harper, following the direction of the pointing finger with their eyes, saw nothing—except the wall. Adair admitted as much.

"If that is the case, Monsieur Roland, one part of your client's wish was gratified—it was hidden enough. I have been in this room I suppose hundreds of times; I have never noticed anything unusual about that wall, and I see nothing unusual now."

"You perceive that there is a bookcase there, and a bookcase there. Between them are four pegs. Below those pegs there is a shelf, on which, at present, there are papers—all littered. The lens is behind those papers—in accordance with Mr. Creed's instructions. He said that he would take care that every night an empty space should be left between those papers so that the lens should not be screened. Perhaps you have put the papers as they are."

"I daresay; I have taken papers on and off that shelf perhaps a score of times."

"Since Mr. Creed died?"

"Certainly; I never touched a thing upon that shelf before he died."

"Then that explains. Probably every night while he was still living there was a vacant space upon that shelf through which the lens could see."

"Then in that case——" Mr. Adair stopped; exchanging glances with John Harper, he showed signs of being unusually moved—for him. "It occurs to me, Mr. Roland, that we're going to stumble upon what may turn out to be the most curious part of a very curious business. You didn't know that Mr. Creed was dead till you had my reply to your note?"

"I did not; I heard it with surprise. When did he die?"

"Early on the morning of the thirteenth of May."

"Then that makes it stranger still. The business of fixing the lens was only finished on the seventh

of May. The last time I saw him was on the eighth, when he paid our bill. For an old man he seemed to be in very good health—nothing ailed him. Of what did he die?"

"He was murdered, Monsieur Roland."

"Murdered! It is not possible! Mr. Creed was murdered—in this room—in this room in which we are?"

The little man had risen from his seat in a state of agitation.

"Mr. Creed was murdered in this room early on the morning of the thirteenth of May."

"Who was the criminal, the assassin? Who murdered him?"

"That no one has discovered; the police have failed to find even so much as a clue."

"Then—if that is the case—do you not perceive—the cinematograph, Mr. Adair? If Mr. Creed was murdered in this room early in the morning—then may not the whole story be on the cinematograph?"

"Do you think that is possible?"

"Possible? Of course it is possible. It is even probable—my word, yes! Permit that I explain. Someone comes through the window—he gets on the floor here." M. Roland had moved to the window for the purpose of illustrating his words with his actions. "The moment he opens the window a current of electricity is set in motion which lights a lamp which sets the cinematograph machinery in a motion. There is the lens, looking right at him; it takes in the whole room—not a point is hidden, not a part of it escapes it. Suppose Mr. Creed comes from his own apartments because an electric bell has been rung which is just over his bed; his private apartments were through that door?"

"They were; and the presumption is that he was disturbed from sleep and did come through that door in his night-shirt."

"Good! Then you have the picture! The moment he comes through the door he is on the film—they are both on the film, the man who came through the window and Mr. Creed; everything they do is recorded, every movement of their fingers. If it was the man who came through the window or perhaps through the door—he may have forced his way through that—for all practical purposes it is the same thing—if that man killed Mr. Creed it is on the cinematograph. We have only to develop the film, which is nothing; we have the whole crime, every detail in all its completeness—for ever and ever. My dear Mr. Adair, you'll excuse me, but if that is on the film—all that!—and there is no reason why it should not be; as the representative of Plantin Frères, there is practically no sum, I tell you, which we will not give for that film. On the film which is in that lens, if the apparatus worked—there is no reason why it would not do, I adjusted it myself!—there is a fortune for you as well as for us. There is not a town, not a village, in the whole world which would not pay for the right to use it. *Mon Dieu!*—a real murder, the whole story, told under such circumstances on a cinematographic film—that will be the greatest thing the trade has ever seen. They paid thousands of pounds to reproduce a prize fight. For that—if the record is there—there is practically no sum which we will not pay; you have my word for it, and I speak, mind you, for Plantin Frères, the greatest dealers in cinematographic films existing—and that is to say something."

CHAPTER XXII.

WHAT THEY SAID TO EACH OTHER.

MARTIN ADAIR spent an evening with Mr. and Mrs. Bishop Guy in Redcliffe Mansions, with whom Miss Dennis was stopping. A doctor lived not very far from The Dovecote, and Mr. Adair had gone and fetched him. He was bending over the patent bedstead in the back room within ten minutes of the girl's having informed the lodger that her mother was dead. Miss Dennis was right. The broken life was ended; to all intents and purposes it had been ended years ago—now, the actual, visible, medical and legal end had really come. Whether consciousness had ever come to the woman who was paralysed in brain as well as body, so that with understanding eyes she had seen her son and daughter contending, never would be known. She had been dead within a few seconds of the brother's having thrown his sister on the floor.

In the morning Mrs. Bishop Guy came, remaining an inmate of The Dovecote until, two days afterwards, Mrs. Dennis was buried. Then Miss Dennis went to stay with her at Redcliffe Mansions; The Dovecote was shut up; Martin Adair took rooms at the Colossus Hotel, hobnobbing with his friend,

John Harper, and paying frequent visits to the small flat which was in the street off the Fulham Road. On the evening to which reference has been made, Mr. Adair dined in the flat, and afterwards found himself in his hostess's own tiny sitting-room, alone with Miss Dennis. Matters between them were not quite on the footing the gentleman would have liked. The girl was very far from well. Her mother's death, coming on top of so many other trials and troubles, had been the final straw. She had attended the funeral, although she had to get out of bed to do so; when she returned from the cemetery she went straight back to bed, and there she stayed for three days. When she rose, and Mr. Adair was able to see her again, she seemed to him to have been reduced almost to half her size.

"Is she in a decline?" he demanded of Mrs. Bishop Guy. "Oughtn't she to see the doctor? She seems to me to be actually ill."

"My dear Mr. Adair, I do not think that it is absolutely necessary that she should see a doctor. Of course, if you wish to send for one of the big guns from Harley Street, do so. Money is nothing to you, and even a great physician, I imagine, is glad to get his fee; but the trouble is, I don't fancy Winnie will see him even if he comes, so what will be the use? Don't you think that that's positively lovely?"

The lady was engaged in doing something to a hat of wondrous and mysterious design. She held it up for the gentleman to see.

"Yes, lovely!" he said, with that tactful resourcefulness which is apt to mark a man on such an occasion. "What is the thing?"

"What is the thing!" The scandalised lady looked like a living note of exclamation. "The thing's a hat—what do you suppose the thing is if it's not a hat?"

"I wondered; it seems such a queer shape."

"A queer shape! You poor, misguided creature—it's the very latest! You shall see it in its proper place upon my head." She suited the action to the word. "Now do you see that it's a hat? And now what do you think of it?"

"It's extraordinary how some women do become even headgear like that." The reply was not quite perhaps what she would have preferred. He returned to the former topic. "If Winnie is ill, then she ought to have a doctor. It's not a question of whether she will see him—she's got to."

"When a man tells a woman that she's got to do a thing she always does it—that's notorious. A person who is so lacking in taste as not to appreciate such a triumph of artistry as my new hat is not qualified to tell the most insignificant feminine creature what she's got to do, and certainly is not entitled to talk in that strain to Winifred Dennis."

When the proposition was made to Miss Dennis, that young lady took up the attitude which her friend had foretold.

"Thank you; I'm perfectly well! I don't want to see a doctor. If one came I wouldn't see him. He wouldn't do me the least good. My physical health is all right; I'm only worrying a little as to the best way in which I can earn my daily bread. I don't see how I can go back to The Dovecote, and keep on letting lodgings."

Mr. Adair, to whom this remark was addressed,

"'I don't want to see a doctor. If one came I wouldn't see him.'"

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said nothing. He had heard others very like it before, and was to hear them again. That night—to which we once more return—he had gone to Redcliffe Mansions with the express intention of having it out with the young lady as soon as dinner was ended. It was with Mrs. Bishop Guy's connivance that he was alone with her in that tiny sitting-room.

The girl had gone in there to write a letter. Mr. Adair, following, had found her with her face on her hands, in an attitude which, since her eyes were covered, scarcely suggested writing letters. When the door opened she suddenly sat up straight, and, having glanced round, applied a handkerchief, for some suspicious purpose, to her eyes.

"I'm very sorry," she murmured; "but I'm engaged."

"Yes, you are. You're engaged to me!"

That this was hardly the answer she had expected was suggested by the spot of colour which flamed on either cheek, as those spots were apt to flame whenever the girl was deeply moved.

"You're not to talk to me like that." The voice in which she spoke might still be described as a murmur, she seemed so incapable of raising it.

"Nor are you to talk to me like that." Mr. Adair, standing before the minute fireplace, whose size was in keeping with the rest of the apartment, seemed to dominate the whole room; a fact of which the girl seemed to be uncomfortably conscious.

"I—I wish you'd go. I—I've got to write some letters."

The gentleman ignored what distinctly amounted to an appeal.

"You're treating me with a cruelty of which I had

not supposed you capable. It is no consolation to me to know that you are treating yourself just as cruelly."

"What—what do you mean by that? I—I'm not fit to talk just now, if you don't mind."

"I love you; I have loved you since the moment when I first saw you standing in the door of The Dovecote. I have reason to believe that you love me. To you love may mean nothing——"

"You have no right to say that."

"To me love means a very great deal; therefore I wish you to fix a date on which you will become my wife."

"With my mother only just dead?"

"If Mrs. Dennis were alive, she would urge you to do as I wish, as you are very well aware. If she can hear us now, I am sure that her prayer to you would be mine—that you also know. Don't try to confuse the situation with sophistries—it's unworthy of you, Winnie. There is no reason why you and I should not be married next week."

"Next week!" The girl's face was all aflame. "I sometimes wonder if——" The girl paused.

"If—what?"

"If you are mad."

"My dear Winnie, you don't deceive me, and I doubt if you deceive yourself—you don't wonder anything of the kind. What reason is there why we should not be married next week?"

"What reason is there why we should? Why, I don't even know who you are." She spoke with sudden passion. "I can't help it; I wouldn't say a word about it, I don't want to say a word, only—you keep on talking and you don't explain. Can't

you understand that a girl doesn't want to marry a man about whom she knows absolutely nothing at all, even if he is a millionaire, and then some girls would like to know something about how he got his millions."

"I see; it's like that. Now the cat is beginning to peep out of the bag." The quizzical smile with which he looked down at her seemed to increase her warmth.

"I am quite aware, as well aware as you can possibly be, that for a person in my position to show the slightest curiosity about a person in yours may be presumption; but when that person persists in talking as you do, then I think there are one or two elementary facts about which I am entitled to ask questions."

"And pray what may those facts be? Ask your questions. Consider me as being on the witness-stand entirely at your disposal. What do you want to know?"

"You may laugh at me, but under the circumstances I really don't think that you're entitled to."

"I'm not laughing, or if I am it's only on the surface. Within I'm gravity itself. Ask on."

"I will. In the first place, is your name Adair?"

"I was not born Adair."

"Then"—the girl drew a long breath—"I never heard of such a thing! Did you propose to marry me as Martin Adair?"

"I did not. I proposed to do nothing of the kind."

"Then what did you propose to marry me as, if—as you kindly suggest—you did propose to marry me?"

"Oh! yes, I did propose to marry you. I propose to marry you now. That's the one aim and object of my existence."

"Is it? That's very good of you. And how long after we were married would you have been likely to think it expedient to inform me that your name was Jones or Brown?"

"I should never have been likely to think that expedient, because my name isn't Jones or Brown. My name is Maurice Ashurst."

"Then, what that man said was true?"

"Do you mean when he said that I was a forger?"

"Of course I don't mean that! How dare you suggest that I mean anything of the sort?"

"I am suggesting nothing; I am only trying to arrive at facts."

"I mean that what he said was true, and that you are the son of the Marquis of Staines."

"I am. I really don't see on what grounds, either of logic or common sense, you are justified in blaming me for that."

"And you pretend to think that I'm the proper sort of person to become your wife—I, the girl who let you lodgings, who cleaned your boots, who washed and scrubbed and cooked for you——"

"Don't throw that in my face; it's not fair."

"To whom you lent money, whose brother is a thief, who was engaged to a man who is a still greater thief——"

"That I don't believe. You never were engaged to him. I almost killed him for hinting that you were."

"I never was exactly engaged to him, but Charlie was in his power, and they both kept urging

me; they would never let me alone, and, when Mr. Ray said he was the only person who could keep my brother out of the hands of the police, I—I don't know what I did say; but I always hated him, always, always! I couldn't bear to be in the same room, in the same house, with him! All the same, I nearly was engaged to him, and I'm not fit to be anybody's wife, especially the wife of the son of the Marquis of Staines."

Turning on her chair, leaning her elbows on the table, the girl used her handkerchief for purposes about which there could be no doubt whatever.

"I am of a different opinion; I consider you to be the ideal wife for the son of the Marquis of Staines, and I occupy a position in which my opinion ought to have some weight. I have been in deeper waters than you. When I was a young man I was a fool; I lived in an atmosphere of debt and extravagance. When I began to understand why it was that my mother always looked so pale and seemed so sad it was already too late; like my father and my brother, I owed money which I could not pay. They were on the brink of ruin."

The speaker paused. When he continued his tone had grown a little harder.

"I am telling you these things because you are about to be my wife; and experience has taught me that there is something in the old-fashioned notion that husbands and wives ought to bare their breasts to each other. But you will understand presently why I preferred to keep my own counsel. If I had known what awaited me at The Dovecote, I would have told you the whole truth straight away that first afternoon. But how could I tell, when I

knocked at your door, that the girl who would open it, would be my wife ? "

"You needn't be so sure that she will be your wife."

"I have been told that where a woman is concerned one should be sure of nothing; but I am sure of you. I fancy that every man is sure of one woman; you are the woman of whom I am sure."

"You are not justified in saying anything of the kind. You don't know in the very least what kind of person I really am."

"Don't I? We'll leave that for the moment; we'll continue to deal with the elementary facts on which you desire information. Just as I was beginning to realise that ruin was somewhere in the air, without the slightest warning so far as I was concerned, it was on us, with the force of an earthquake shock, and I was, as it were, submerged in the fissures which opened in the ground."

"Wasn't there——" Miss Dennis was writing imaginary letters on a blotting-pad with the point of an inkless pen. "Wasn't there—a girl—of whom you were fond ? "

There was a perceptible interval before he answered.

"You've heard that story? It depends on your definition of the word 'fond.' There was a girl who had some money which I was given to understand might avert the impending ruin, of whom I was fond, in a way, and am fond still, but not in the way in which I'm fond of you. You—in a way, you seem to have become part of my life."

"That's ridiculous."

"I suppose you've heard that the girl went down

with us, she was involved in our ruin. Possibly, also, you've heard what was the immediate cause of the disaster. Here I speak to you in confidence, as a man speaks to his wife. If you are not prepared to respect my confidence as if you were my wife I had better keep still. Does silence imply consent?"

She was still writing imaginary letters; her face was towards the blotting-pad; her voice scarcely rose above a whisper.

"Whatever you say to me will never be repeated to anyone else."

He waited, as if to grasp the full meaning of her words; then, with a smile, went on:

"You have said enough, thank you. I'll make you my confessor. Money was obtained on deeds which proved to be forged to the extent of some thirty-seven thousand pounds; I give you the approximate figures, I never knew them exactly. The question arose—Who was the forger? I thought it better, for various reasons, to let it be supposed that I was. But I was not."

She raised her head and turned to look at him.

"Of that I am certain."

"Thank you. Lady Louisa Southworth was the name of the girl to whom you refer. When a prosecution was threatened the whole of her fortune was used to ward it off. I—ran. It was absolutely necessary that someone should run—so I did. When afterwards the final crash came, people said that it was caused by me. They were wrong."

"Of that also I am sure."

The girl and the man were looking each other very straight in the eyes.

"You see how well we understand each other. I

went abroad—to North and South America. Like the scapegoat I wandered in the wilderness. I tried to keep myself alive by the labour of my hands. One thing I have learnt, that for a man brought up as I had been that is an almost impossible thing to do. If I had had luck perhaps I might have succeeded, but I had none. One of the best jobs I got was that of clerk in a second-rate San Francisco hotel. One day an Englishman walked in with whom I had some dealing on the turf, and to whom I still owed money. Not unnaturally he resented my appearance. He made certain statements to the management, and I was fired; that is, I was turned out on to the sidewalk there and then, with a few clothes in my grip-sack and a few dollars in my pocket. I had a very bad time after that: San Francisco is not a city of delight to a penniless and friendless Englishman. I lived from hand to mouth, looking back, I don't know how, for nearly two years, and I was continually in movement. Then I got a job on an Argentine ranch—no matter how I got there, I did. Things went tolerably well for another two years. Then the boss, my employer, being pretty full of drink, made himself ugly to a woman who came to me for assistance. In the discussion which followed he put a bullet into my thigh, and I knocked him down. For nearly six months I was dead lame; it was longer before he recovered from what I had given him."

"You must have knocked him down!"

"Oh, yes! I knocked him down; you see, I had to, or he would have killed me instead. I resumed my wanderings. I got over on to the Pacific coast and was a beachcomber on some of the

islands: a beachcomber is a man who is supposed to comb the beach, looking for gold and silver—a pretty helpless, useless, rotten sort of a creature. Then I tried Australia. I went looking for gold, or work, or anything, in the north-west, where it's all desert and no water. Some white man found me, all shrivelled by the sun, a sort of maudlin lunatic. I was three hundred miles away from anywhere, all alone; I had had no food for heaven knows how long, and no water for much longer. That white was a Good Samaritan. He won me back to life, and suggested that since I seemed a trifle out of my element I should return to England. I was heart-broken, and heart-sick, so I went. I booked a passage with his money, and the night before I sailed I heard that he was dead. Just as we were sailing, a man came aboard who told me that Tom Goodman—that was the man's name—had blown his brains out. So you see under what pleasant auspices I started to return to my native land."

The pen had slipped from the girl's fingers; she sat with her eyes riveted on the man's face. When he paused it seemed that she gave a little sigh, but she said nothing.

"I had two pounds fifteen in my pocket when I returned to England, and I hadn't been in my native land more than four and twenty hours before I wished that I had died in the desert. England is about the hardest place in the world—at any rate, that part of it I've seen—for a man situated as I was to earn food, and clothes, and lodging. I don't want to tell you the depths to which I sunk, because there are some things a man wants to hide, even from his wife. But I did get down pretty low. I

got into the habit of spending a good many nights on the Embankment, where there is the cheapest lodging to be had in town, and there I met Jerningham Creed, who thought I had done him a service; and to show his gratitude—which was a thing I had never encountered before—he gave me a post in his office. With him I stayed as clerk until he died."

"What Jerningham Creed was that? Not—not the man who lent the money?"

"The same. He was found dead one morning in his office. Now there's a question which I want to ask you—can you guess what it is?"

The girl seemed to have drawn herself into a smaller compass; the light which had been glowing in her eyes had faded; all at once the look of trouble had returned to her face which to him was too familiar.

"No, I have no idea. How can I guess what question you want to ask me?"

"That afternoon when you opened the door to me at The Dovecote was not the first time I had seen you."

"What do you mean? Do you mean—— Where had you seen me before?"

"I saw you coming down the staircase of the chambers in which Jerningham Creed lived early on the morning of Wednesday, the thirteenth of May. A few hours afterwards he was found dead on the office floor."

The girl's face had changed; she sat staring at him as at some dreadful spectre.

"Do you mean——I don't understand; where were you when you saw me?"

"I was in the court without. As I passed I saw

that the door was open, and I saw a woman coming down the staircase. I drew back. She went running past, without noticing that I was there, out into Fleet Street. When you opened the door to me at The Dovecote I recognised you as the woman who had come down old Creed's staircase."

"But what, at that hour, were you doing in Mitre Court?"

"I had acquired the habit of insomnia. I could not sleep at night. It isn't nice to have to lie between the dirty sheets of a dirty bed in a dirty room struggling for the sleep which would not come. I got very little exercise in the daytime. Sometimes, growing desperate, I would get out of bed and take exercise in the middle of the night. That was one of my nights. I wandered towards Mitre Court, I don't know why—because I did!—and that's how I came to be there. But you—you must excuse my asking the question in my turn—how did you come to be there?"

"Did you say—that that morning—Mr. Creed—was found dead—on the floor of his office?"

"He must have been murdered within a few minutes of your being on that staircase."

The girl seemed to collapse; all the bone and muscle seemed to go out of her.

"You don't think—you can't think——"

He broke into her halting sentence. "You can't be so absurd as to imagine that I think you had anything to do with old Creed's death. But you must see that was an unusual hour for a lady to visit a staircase in Mitre Court."

"I'll tell you how it was, then—then perhaps you'll understand." She put up her hand to brush

her hair back from her temple. "You know I owed Mr. Creed money. I was behind in my payments —according to him I always was. I had had an intimation from him that morning that if I didn't let him have some money in the course of the day, by eight o'clock the next morning he'd send and have my furniture taken away. I was in a dreadful state of mind—there was mother. I was always so afraid of what would become of her if they took all the furniture. I had only a few shillings in the house. Then, quite late, I decided to do something which I had always fought against before. I decided to raise money on my mother's watch and chain, her pearl brooch, and other things of hers; all the jewellery she had left. I went to a pawnbroker's in the North End Road. I got there just as they were closing. They lent me six pounds ten; I wanted fifteen pounds—I believe they were worth it, but they wouldn't lend me more than six pounds ten. I took it, but when I got out into the street I told myself that that was no use. Mr. Creed had said in his letter that he must have at least fifteen pounds, so what was the good of six pounds ten? So I went back home."

"What time was that?"

"It was nearly midnight when I got into the house. I had walked all the way. Mother was all right; I was always so frightened when I was out of the house that something would happen to her—nothing had; she was just as usual. Then as I looked at her my fear of what Mr. Creed would do came back. Six pounds ten, after all, was something. If I gave him that, with some sort of explanation, it might stave him off for a day or two.

It was too late for the post. I sat down, I scribbled a letter, and I put it and the six pounds ten in an envelope, and I went with it to Mitre Court."

"Again walking all the way?"

"I had to; there was no other means of getting there."

"It must be a good seven miles from The Dovecote to Mitre Court."

"I daresay, I don't know—I didn't notice the distance; I walked as fast as I could. I got there, I went upstairs, and I felt for the envelope; my intention was to slip it through the letter-box so that he might find it the first thing in the morning, before he gave orders to have my things taken away. I had no pocket; I had put the envelope inside my bodice and covered it up safely. When I felt for it it wasn't there. The bodice in some way had come unbuttoned; in my haste I hadn't noticed it. I suppose the envelope had fallen out upon the road. When I found that it wasn't there it was all I could do to keep from screaming. It seemed—it seemed as if all at once something had happened to the world, and everything was over. I believe I nearly fainted. I know that I found myself standing close up to the wall, shivering and trembling and crying; because it was such a tragedy for me. It was all dark, there was not a sound, suddenly I was afraid. Then——"

The girl stopped, as if incapable for the moment of further articulate speech. The man watching her made a forward movement, which she checked by putting up her hand. Her power of speech returned.

"Don't come near me—please; I want to make you understand. Where was I? Oh, yes, I know. I was saying that all in an instant I—I became a

coward; some dreadful, unreasoning terror had all at once come over me. Then—then—while I was trying to tell myself that I had no cause to be afraid, there came a sound from the other side of Mr. Creed's door, a whirring, whizzing sound. It was so—so unexpected; I did not ask myself what it could mean, I ran down the staircase, out into the street, and I believe I ran all the way home. I was in a dreadful state when I got home. I could hardly take my clothes off. When I woke in the morning I found myself in bed without being properly undressed, I hadn't done my hair, or anything. The first thing I heard was the whirring, whizzing sound; of course, it was only imagination; but I kept hearing it for days and days."

CHAPTER XXIII.

ON HIS WAY HOME.

THE girl ceased ; and the man was still. He stood watching her with a look which must have moved her had she seen it. But she saw nothing except, as it were, the ghost of herself upon that darkened staircase. Presently, she asked, in a tremulous tone :

" And you say—he was found dead—Mr. Creed—that morning—murdered on his office floor ? That same morning ? " It was a broken question.

" I think he was probably being murdered as you were standing on the landing outside his office door."

" Oh-h-h-h ! " It was a long, drawn-out exclamation.

" The noise you heard was the mechanism of a cinematographic apparatus set suddenly in motion."

" What can you mean ? "

" Creed had had a machine fitted in a receptacle in the wall of his office, the ordinary cinematograph of commerce. There is reason to believe that while you stood outside the door someone had effected a burglarious entrance through a window ; it looks as if he had entered at the very moment you were stand-

ing there, because directly the window was raised, the cinematograph was automatically set in motion. What you heard was probably the whirring of the shutter of the lens, and the unwinding of the reels, as the film passed from one to the other, to say nothing of the machinery which set the whole thing in motion; and, of course, in the intense silence and darkness the slightest sound was magnified.

"The theory is that it was making a record of what was happening in that room on the other side of that door, giving a pictorial history of every detail. The idea was Creed's. He was always expecting to be burgled, having some trifles in his chambers worth a burglar's notice; so he arranged that, if ever a burglar did come he should be snapshotted, not once or twice, but several thousand times. I say that's the theory, the ingenious arrangement has only just been brought to my notice. The film contained in the machine is now being developed. I am expecting every day to be informed of the result. If it is a success you shall see upon the screen what I fancy will be the most remarkable film which has ever been exposed."

"Then do you mean—that—it will show—who murdered Mr. Creed?"

"Precisely; you've got it exactly. The man Ray suggested in your presence that I had had a finger in the business. That film will show if I had or not. You can take it from me that it won't show you; it couldn't see you on the other side of that door; even cinematographic lenses are not yet able to penetrate solid oak. You see how this little conversation of ours is clearing the air, and how

explanation is bringing us closer together. I love you, if the thing were possible, even more than I did, when I think of the white-faced, wild-eyed girl fleeing along the street on rapid feet, the envelope hidden in her bodice; then climbing the pitch-black stairs—it was pretty dark in the court outside—then feeling for the envelope and finding it wasn't there. Oh, my dear, if you know how I longed to take you in my arms and comfort you, for the pity of it! And I will before very long. There is that comforting reflection."

"Please—please don't talk like that—you mustn't. Is it true that Mr. Creed left you all his money?"

"He did; why, goodness only knows! There are those who say he knew—I don't. He has left me also one of the finest collections of stolen property ever gathered together by one collector. I am finding out the owners and returning them as fast as I can. But even when all are returned that can be there will still be a comfortable sum left which I hope I shall be able honestly to call mine—and my wife's."

These last three words he added apparently, on the spur of the moment, as an afterthought.

"Don't you see how every word you say makes it more impossible that I should ever be your wife? You not only belong to a station to which I don't, and therefore have relations who would look at me askance; but you are rich, I understand immensely rich, and I am poor—so poor that I owe the very food I am eating to your benevolence. The thought stifles me. I want to get out into the world and at least earn my own daily bread. You don't want me to marry you because I owe you money—money which I can't pay. And then there's Charlie; I

don't know what he's doing; I am afraid to think; suppose they arrest him and he is sent to gaol. How nice it will be for you for your friends to know that your wife's brother is in prison—a convicted felon."

The girl had risen from her chair; her tremulousness had gone; she was all heat and eagerness. He, when he spoke, was as cool as she was warm.

"I never have concealed from myself the fact that one of the greatest of your gifts is the gift of eloquence; I have always been afraid to match my powers in that direction against yours. I won't argue; please the Fates I never will. I am content with facts—two facts. The one is that I love you, and the other that you love me. Don't you love me?"

"That's not the question; you don't want to enter into a marriage of middle-class affection."

"And pray what may middle-class affection be? It sounds as if it were something funny."

"You mustn't laugh at me; it isn't fair! I mayn't be able to express myself very clearly, but you know what I mean. You ought to make a great marriage."

"A great marriage? Yes, that's what I'm going to do."

"I mean you ought to marry a person in your own rank of life, one who would do you credit. According to your own statement your family fortunes need to be raised, not lowered. Do your duty to your family. You'll soon forget me. How about the girl who—who lost all her money?"

"Are you about to suggest that I should marry her? If you are, save yourself the trouble. I have told myself many a time that I would never marry: I made a vow which I am going to break. I will

not break a second. I have vowed that I will marry you, and I will. I ask you to help me to keep that vow. So shall we say that the marriage shall take place next week? Pray understand that it is not my desire to be unreasonable overmuch. Should next week be inconvenient, you'll find that your convenience is a thing which I am particularly anxious to consult."

The girl sat down on her chair again, turned to the table, and set to tracing on the blotting-pad imaginary letters.

"It doesn't seem to be the slightest use to talk to you. It is impossible to get a man to listen to reason?"

"I dreamed last night that I kissed you. I woke up all of a tremor."

"I wish—I wish you wouldn't talk about such things."

"Just say you love me—that's all."

"It doesn't seem necessary that I should say so; you—you do so take things for granted."

He moved a little from the fireplace; this time she did not check him.

When, shortly afterwards, there came a knocking at the door, and—it being opened about two inches—Mrs. Bishop Guy's voice came through, he was still close to the girl's chair.

"May I come in?" The lady entered. "Augustus wants you to come in and make a four at bridge. He would like one before he goes to bed, and it's getting pretty late."

They went into the other room, where they found that Mr. Bishop Guy was waiting. As they were taking their seats at the table, Mr. Adair said:

"And how goes the New Silk—and the Lock Fastener?"

"Matters are being pushed on as fast as they possibly can. The New Silk will be on the market next month, and the Fastener, which requires special machinery, directly afterwards. Contracts have been made for advertising, the trade has been sounded, conditional orders have already been booked which will keep us going for twelve months. In two—three—four years, you will find yourself, Mr. Adair, a Prince of Commerce."

"And you a king?"

"No, no, I shan't be a king. I have no ambition in that direction; but I shall be in possession of a rattling good income, and I shall be able to afford my wife an occasional pair of shoes."

"By then I shall have a wife, who will also probably be in want of an occasional pair of shoes." They were cutting for the deal; he turned the three of spades. "I think I deal."

"I wonder if it would be too much to ask if, Mr. Adair, you already have a lady in your eye?"

Just then Miss Dennis faced the deuce.

"She's turned the two. I refer you to the dealer."

"Don't you think," remarked Mrs. Bishop Guy with an air of severity, "that you might leave business alone, just for once in a way?" Then with twinkling eyes she added, "And marriage is the most serious business in the world."

It was nearly one o'clock when Mr. Adair left Redcliffe Mansions, having played a little bridge, and discussed a great many things with his host and hostess, and one or two trifles with Miss Dennis. Just as he was going, Mr. Bishop Guy vanished from

the room, and an instant later his wife went after him. So Mr. Adair was alone with Miss Dennis.

"Those are two very thoughtful people."

Mr. Adair spoke with an air of meaning just what he said and no more; but the girl seemed confused.

"It isn't fair of Ella to—to go like that."

"Good-night." Mr. Adair was standing by the chair on which the girl was seated. She held out her hand to him. "Won't you stand up to say good-night?" So—as if without intending to move—she stood up.

He took her in his arms and good-night was said.

When he reached the street, he paused for a moment to light a cigar. The pavements seemed deserted; his quick eye caught sight of a figure which slunk into a doorway two houses from that in front of which he stood. He lighted his cigar with particular care.

"I wonder who you are? Recent events have made me so suspicious that I'm always wondering. I think I'll pass your way and have a look at you."

He went along the pavement with great strides, and as he neared the doorway which the figure had entered he tightened his grip on the malacca cane which he was carrying. When he was abreast of it he slackened his pace. Someone was standing as far back as was possible. Mr. Adair paused. Not a word was spoken. The man—it was a man—darting out, threw something in his face: apparently a paper bag whose construction was so delicate that it burst of its own volition as it passed through the air. Some sort of powder which had a peculiarly pungent odour came out of the burst bag straight at Adair's face. The moment he saw the man's

hand raised he leaped back to one side and ducked. Swift though his movement was, some of the powder touched his cheek, seeming to scorch the skin. Had he remained for a moment where he was, the falling powder would have descended on him. But he was not for a moment still. He leaped away, striking at his assailant as he did so. The full force of his blow was lost, but part of it got home. The man gave a sort of squeal and went flying down the pavement. Adair stood up. His cheek seemed to be on fire.

"He's marked me with that pretty stuff of his. My word, how it hurts!"

He staggered, rather than moved, backwards, off the kerb into the roadway. Although only a few grains of the powder could have touched him, they had inflicted excruciating pain. He knitted his brow, tightened his lips, gritted his teeth; it was not easy to keep from exclaiming. A faint whistle was heard, so faint that it was only just audible; it was not the first time it had saluted his ears; its import was familiar.

"There's someone else coming; confound this cheek of mine! it hurts so that it's hard to keep myself all there. I'd better be moving — if I can."

Turning, he strode along the roadway, keeping as near to the centre as he could; moving a little unsteadily, as a man might do who is feeling a trifle dazed. It seemed that out of all the doorways on both sides of the street figures appeared.

"What an ass I was not to bring a gun; there's going to be trouble. There's only one thing I can do, and that is to make a dash for it, if I can dash." He broke into a run, making straight for a man

who was in front of him. "All right, my friend; at least I'll deal with you."

But the man did not wait. As Mr. Adair approached he swerved to one side, bent almost double, threw something and went flying past him. Another paper packet of powder burst in the air. At least a few grains reached Adair. Without pause he tore on. Figures on either side of the road were closing in on him. He caught one man with his malacca cane on the shoulder; the man went down on to the road. The others discharged their packets of powder. Tiny, invisible particles of what appeared to be dust seemed to fill the air. It was impossible to avoid them all. He tore blindly on, striking at them as he went. Had he stumbled, in all probability that would have been the end of him; he would not have risen again, they would have finished with him as he lay upon the road. But he managed not to stumble. He struck at them frantically, some of his blows got home; yet they hung on to him, other packets were thrown. He staggered, reeled, was falling, when the whistle was heard again. As it seemed by magic his assailants vanished. Someone was coming towards him along the pavement with great, clumsy steps. A voice hailed him.

"Here, what's all this? Who are all of those chaps? What were they trying to do to you, sir?"

"Thank God," cried Adair," you're a policeman!"

Had not the blue-coated figure put a protecting arm about him, he would have fallen to the ground.

"Here!" exclaimed the guardian of the night, "what's wrong? What have they done to you, sir? I do believe he's fainted."

CHAPTER XXIV.

IN DEFIANCE OF ORDERS.

MR. ADAIR looked up at John Harper, who was standing by his bed.

"Well, are you admiring the picture I present?"

Grim as was Mr. Harper's face when he replied, his tone was even grimmer.

"At this moment I certainly am not. To begin with, there is very little of you to be seen. Your face is nearly all lint and bandages; I can see the whole of one eye and part of the other. It occurs to me that you are paying pretty dearly for the fortune left you by Mr. Jerningham Creed."

"I am—and that's a fact! They very nearly had me this time; I shouldn't wonder if next time they had me quite."

"Nor I—which is a pleasant prospect for you. The doctor tells me that in all probability they have marked your face for ever—that's another comforting reflection."

"I don't suppose it will improve my beauty; but, between ourselves, Harper, I haven't much belief in what doctors say. I'm a man with nine lives; although I've lost four or five of them I have still

a few in hand. In a few months, or even weeks, I shouldn't be a bit surprised if I were as beautiful as ever—in spite of all the doctor says. At the same time I can't help feeling—we'll say a trifle anxious—about what may happen the next time they have a go at me. I shall be glad when that arbitration committee of yours has given its award."

"They've given it; that's what I've come to see you about. It's in my pocket."

"That's you all over. You stand there cheering me up by unpleasant allusions to my personal appearance while somewhere on you is the prescription which may—or may not—do me all the good in the world. Take that award out of your pocket and let me hear what it is."

John Harper produced a pocket-book, and from the pocket-book a paper—explaining its import as he unfolded it.

"You know who the members of the committee were and what was the question they had to consider. I got seven men of the highest commercial integrity, citizens of different countries, and submitted to them this question—or perhaps I ought to call it a problem."

Mr. Harper looked over the top of the paper at the nearly shrouded face which was turned up towards him on the pillow.

"Certain articles were taken from the Winter Palace in Pekin, under circumstances which are not altogether clear, and with which we, at any rate, are unfamiliar. We are not certain even by whom they were taken. When we first heard of them they were in the hands of what we will call a syndicate of Chinese adventurers, represented by an individual

whom we will call Brown. Brown offered them to Jones at a certain price—no doubt less than they would fetch in the ordinary way in the open market, but still a good price. Jones agreed to pay that price, but before it was paid, he died, leaving these articles to Smith, his heir. The question is—What ought Smith to do? Ought he to return the articles to Brown, representing the Chinese syndicate, or pay him the price agreed by Jones? or hand the property over to the Crown or to the police? or try to find the original owners in Pekin? It may be remarked that the attempt to do the latter would be a very expensive, troublesome, and lengthy process, and would almost inevitably result in failure. It may also be observed that it does not appear that the Crown, or police, of any one country have any more claim to the goods than the Crown or police of any other country; nor is it easy to perceive what good would be gained by handing them over to either of those authorities. It may be added that Smith, the present holder, is a gentleman and a man of nice honour; he desires to be advised as to what is the proper course which he ought to pursue in dealing with the goods."

"That last sentence is a triumph, Harper—the allusion to Smith as being a gentleman and a man of nice honour. As Smith, allow me to thank you very much."

"That, as I have said, is, baldly, the proposition which I placed before the committee."

"I was already aware of that; you needn't be more explicit."

"Although expressing themselves in different ways the members of the committee are all of the same

opinion. First of all—as to general principles—they are agreed that it is a position in which Smith is entitled to do exactly as he pleases. They consider —that's the particular point—that Smith's wisest course of action would be to hand over the amount agreed by Jones to Brown as the representative of the Chinese syndicate. Each member of the committee emphatically states that that is what he would do; each man Jack of them regards himself as much a gentleman, and as of as nice a sense of honour, as Smith, or anybody else. There is the award for you; I am bound to state that it is one with which I am wholly in sympathy."

"In other words, I'm to hand over twenty thousand pounds to Outerbridge and consider the plunder from Pekin as mine—that's what it comes to."

"And a very sensible conclusion at which to arrive. You can have the broken pieces of that joss thing soldered together and placed over your own bed instead of the Chinese Emperor's."

"You think it would be safe there? That Chinese syndicate would leave it alone?"

"Adair!" There was a quizzical expression on Harper's face as he spoke. "If those gentlemen have not what you and I would call a 'nice sense of honour,' they have at least a standard of honour of their own. If you paid them their money, I do honestly believe they would leave you the goods. While you persist in not paying the money, and sticking to the goods, it seems to me to be only human nature that—well, you know what."

"That they should throw packets of an infernal, ingenious and murderous variety of corrosive sublimate at the face and person of the high-minded Smith."

"It may appear to them to be the only way of bringing him to a proper sense of the situation. I've been thinking, Adair. Ask the enterprising Mr. Outerbridge, and such of his clients as choose to attend, to a little—function; hand over the twenty thousand pounds, get his receipt, and—present the company with a little entertainment."

"Wouldn't the twenty thousand pounds be entertainment enough?"

"There's a line from Paris to say that that cinematograph film has been developed, and that Monsieur Roland is waiting for your instructions to come over and give you ocular demonstration of what a remarkable film it is. Messieurs Plantin Frères add that they are willing to treat with you for the right to produce copies of the film on the most liberal terms, and that Monsieur Roland has full powers to act on their behalf. That seems to suggest that the film is, at any rate, not a very bad one. What do you say to entertaining Outerbridge and his clients with a display of that film upon the screen? Don't you think they might find that amusing?"

"You believe, then, that they were concerned in the matter?"

"That I don't pretend to say. If they were, they ought to find it more amusing still. We shall know more about that when Monsieur Roland comes to town; my own idea was to offer them entertainment I will leave you to consider the matter at your leisure. I am sorry to say I must go; I am a man of affairs who has sometimes to keep his appointments. There is another point which I might mention before I go—a lady has been to see you."

"A lady? Harper! What lady?"

Mr. Adair showed more signs of interest than he had hitherto evinced.

"She gave her name as Mrs. Bishop Guy. She wanted to come upstairs; when I told her you were resting and were not to be disturbed, she developed distinct symptoms of what I should call huffiness. She seemed to want to know who I was and what I meant by it; then she went away, leaving a general impression behind that, in her judgment, I was a creature utterly beneath contempt. She was small in size, but in another direction she was large. I have an uncomfortable feeling that she would have proved too big for me if she had insisted upon seeing you. Fortunately, she concluded that it wasn't worth her while to make a meal of me. The doctor distinctly said that no women were to be allowed to come near you."

"I can't see a woman while I'm like this, quite apart from the doctor I must look awful! The sight of me would make any woman ill."

"It's not quite so bad as that; some women could look at you without being utterly upset. Anyhow, the doctor seems to think that heaven only knows when your appearance will improve. It's your nervous state I'm thinking about; a woman might wreck it. No woman is to come into this room. Who's there? Why don't you knock? What in thunder——"

John Harper did not finish his speech, because his surprise seemed to be too much for him. Without warning having been given of anyone being on the other side, the handle was turned, the door was opened, and in the aperture stood a girl.

"Is this Mr. Adair's room?" she inquired. Then she answered her own question: "I see it is." Then

she moved right in—towards the bed. She addressed its inmate. "I'm very glad," she said, "to see that you're still alive." She turned towards John Harper, regarding him with a look in her eyes which he seemed to find extremely disconcerting. "I was afraid, from the way in which someone treated Ella when she came to make inquiries, that you might be dead." There was a catching in her voice of which she seemed to make an effort to get the better. "You are Mr. Harper, the gentleman who behaved to Mrs. Bishop Guy as if she were a person who had come to borrow money."

"I was not aware that I behaved to her quite like that; but my name is certainly Harper; it's an unfortunate fact."

"It does seem to be an unfortunate fact. As I wish to say something to—Martin, which it is not necessary that all the world should hear, would you mind——" She left her sentence unfinished, but he grasped her meaning.

"Not in the least—not in the very slightest degree; nothing will give me greater pleasure than to leave you to talk to—Martin, instead of to me." The speaker hurried from the room; the girl turned to the bed.

"Is that the Mr. Harper of whom you have told me? I don't think much of him. I thought he was quite a different kind of person."

"He's one of the best fellows in the world; he thinks a lot of you."

"I don't see how he can, considering that he knows nothing about me. He positively frightened Ella."

"Did he? Then, between ourselves, if that is so, there must have been a sort of reflex action, because she frightened him."

"Why wouldn't he let her come and see you?"

"Because the doctor said that no one was to come and see me."

"Does no one include me? Because I am going to see you even if it does. Martin, what have you been doing?"

"At least I've brought you to the point at which you call me Martin."

"If I do call you Martin—that's not your name."

"I'm always going to be Martin to you; I hope you'll always call me Martin. I have done a good deal if I've induced you to call me Martin. I've often wanted to hear you call me Martin; now I have. I had no idea that it would sound so sweet. If I were poetic, or anything of that sort, I should say that it sounded like music on your tongue. As it is, I'm just willing to hear you call me Martin again—that's all."

"I perceive that you are still ridiculous." The lady's manner was perhaps intended to be dignified. But when she looked at him, and saw the spectacle he presented, she became all tender anxiety. "My dear," she asked again, "what have they done to you?"

"They've made rather a show of me, haven't they?"

"They have? Who has? Was it Mr. Ray—or—or his friends?"

With an effort he shook his bandaged head.

"No, it wasn't that lot; it was some other friends of mine."

She seemed to be relieved. "I—I was afraid—that Charlie might have had something to do with it."

"Not he. He had nothing to do with it—he or his friends. I have so many friends. How came you to know—that I had met with an accident?"

"It's four days since I saw you; wasn't that enough in itself? I've seen you every single day since I saw you first; do you suppose you can stay away without my noticing it? Then, that night you promised to come the next day and talk over things. When you didn't come, do you imagine that I didn't know it was something unusual which was keeping you away?"

"I sent you a message."

"A message! You call that a message! Your Mr. Harper rang me up on the telephone and told me some ridiculous story about some engagement which would prevent you coming over to Kensington, and which even kept you from coming to the telephone to tell me so—as if I didn't know that nothing but something dreadful would keep you from doing that."

"That first day I was pretty bad. I couldn't even speak. Harper was a sportsman to think of telephoning to you; he did it all off his own bat; I was incapable of giving instructions of any kind."

"I went straight from the telephone to Ella, and I said to her, 'Something has happened to Martin Adair.' When she laughed I could have shaken her. Your Mr. Harper pretending that an engagement kept you away from the telephone! I knew! Then I sent you a message; did he give it to you?"

"I'm rather hazy about the first forty-eight hours; but I have a sort of dim notion that he did say something about your having telephoned that you'd expect me the next morning."

"I rang you up after dinner, and he came to the telephone again, and said you hadn't yet returned. So I told him to tell you when you did return that

I should be very glad if you could manage to come to Redcliffe Mansions the next morning before eleven, as there was something I rather wished to say to you."

"What did he say to that? You see I just managed to make him understand that I wanted my little accident kept dark from you. Your message must have put him in rather a hole."

"It did—that was plain enough from the way in which he stammered and stuttered, and hummed and hawed. He tried to pretend that he thought you had an engagement which would prevent your coming over the next morning. But when I told him that I was sure that if he gave you my message nothing would do that, he simply cut me off. So I went raging to Ella."

"Mrs. Bishop Guy must have had rather an agreeable time."

"She had a horrid time—but then so had I. I had one of those horrid times which you can't have all by yourself; I had to let myself go with someone else, and she was the only other creature about the place. The next morning I rang you up as soon as I was out of bed. There was that bothering Mr. Harper at the telephone again! I asked him to send you."

"And what did he say to that?"

"He said that you hadn't been in all night, but directly you did come in he'd let you know I had rung you up."

"Stout fellow, Harper—a man in a thousand! I remember I was just able to speak that morning when he came and told me what you'd done."

"Well, he's been doing it ever since, that's what

he's done; so I sent Ella. She didn't want to come, but I made her. I told her that I didn't believe a word of your Mr. Harper's absurd inventions, but that I did believe that something dreadful had happened to you, and that she was to see you, or find out what was wrong before she left this building. A nice mess she made of it. I thought she had more sense!"

"Mrs. Bishop Guy appears to have had a thoroughly pleasant time with you since I saw you last."

"She's so silly! She came: she found the inevitable Mr. Harper. I had told her that she was not to pay the slightest attention to him, but that she was to walk straight past him up to your room. She actually made out that he wouldn't let her!"

"Well, he wouldn't. I know that's a positive fact."

"My dear—Martin." She hesitated a second, but the Christian name did come out. "Do you imagine that I would have let him stop me? That's what I told her. She came back with her story of how he would not let her pass, and she dared to say that he would not have let me pass either; so I said I'd show her. And I have—because here I am. And now that I am here I'm going to stop. I'm going to take off my hat and my jacket, and I'm going to wait till the doctor comes; and then if a nurse is required, which I think is very likely, I know of a person who is fully qualified to fill the place. So perhaps you'll tell me the whole story of what happened to you after you left Redcliffe Mansions, and how you came to be lying here; and don't imagine that you'll be doing me a kindness by trying to conceal the least little tiny thing."

So he told her; and the telling took some time—especially as she sat by his bedside, and occasionally stroked the hand which lay upon the cover. During the course of his narrative she went white and red, and she trembled and cried, and gave unmistakable proof of being moved to the very foundations of her being. When he had finished she gave utterance to certain observations, several of which were sufficiently trite.

"Martin—I shall always call you Martin, even if your real name is Maurice—one can pay too much even for a fortune."

"That depends upon the nature of the fortune. I couldn't pay too much for you."

"Please do try to be reasonable. Rather than that you should run the risks you do it would be much better to give these men what they want. I shall never know a moment's peace of mind if I feel that you are daring them to do their worst; which is practically what you are doing. I have had four dreadful days as it is, and you know I have had so many dreadful days in my time; don't you think that it might be worth your while to concede a point to them—if not for your sake, then for mine?"

"For your sake I certainly think it would be worth while to concede them anything. One of the things I most desire is that you should know peace of mind."

Her reply was perhaps a little unexpected.

"Then, if that is the case, perhaps you'll let me stay and nurse you; I think that while I am doing that I might know peace of mind."

CHAPTER XXV.

AFTER MANY YEARS.

THE nursing was a sort of joint-stock affair—until the doctor stated that the patient was really quite capable of looking after himself. Mrs. Bishop Guy, Miss Dennis, and John Harper were all willing to do everything which the invalid required—occasionally, in the evening, Mr. Bishop Guy looked in to lend a hand. Presently, Martin Adair, being to all intents and purposes himself again, ready to go anywhere and do anything, the staff was dismissed. Indeed, to such a state of convalescence had he attained that he accepted an invitation to another dinner in Radcliffe Mansions —and Mr. Harper went with him. The gentleman's chaperonage was in a measure the result of certain remarks which Miss Dennis made.

"You haven't yet settled matters with those men," she observed, "and until you have I will not allow you to go about unattended." Perceiving signs of remonstrance on her hearer's face she hurried on. "No, I will not!—I shall not know a moment's ease if I think you are still running unnecessary risks.

The first thing you have to do is to settle things with those men; then we'll talk of other matters afterwards."

The final words were a reference to a topic on which Mr. Adair was very fond of touching.

"Marry me," he would say, "at the earliest possible moment, and you shall never know a moment's uneasiness again,"

She would not see it in that way; she wanted other things settled first. So he set about doing what she wanted. One day he had a letter in a lady's hand, which seemed to interest him greatly—yet it was not a long one. It just ran:

"MY DEAR MAURICE,—Your note was an amazement. I have been wondering and wondering—and behold you drop out of the skies. Seriously, the sight of your handwriting made me tremble—if these lines seem shaky it is because I am trembling still. I would come this instant to see you; only somewhere in the words you have written I seem to see the expression of a wish that I should wait until you come to see me. So I will wait—till Thursday, when I shall expect you to lunch.—Yours, LOUISA."

It was written in the fine Italian hand which women used to write. Somehow the whole note had about it the flavour of an older fashion. It could scarcely have been written by a woman, young or old, who was in sympathy with the rough-and-ready methods of to-day. Its recipient recognised the fact with something which was very like a touch of pain.

"The sight of her handwriting seems to bring me back to the things which are dead—she's unchanged. This might have been written by the Louisa South-

worth of heaven knows how many years ago. What she was she is ; I trust she won't expect to find me the same. I wish that she had married. She'd make an ideal, old-fashioned wife, the sweet mother of nice, old-fashioned children. I hate to think of her as an old maid."

On the morning of the day on which Mr. Martin Adair had appointed to call on Lady Louisa Southworth, he knocked at the door of a sufficiently modest-looking house in Farm Street. The door was opened by a matronly-looking female, who addressed him by the name which he had not used for years.

"I trust, Lord Maurice, that you find yourself well—if you'll permit me to say so, your lordship looks quite well."

He stared and started as if he had seen a ghost. "Parker!" he exclaimed. He had not seen the woman for more years than he cared to think of; he had an absurd feeling that he might be looking at a ghost. She had been Lady Louisa's nurse when her ladyship was an infant in arms; it seemed incredible that she should be there still. He as good as told her so. "Parker!—is it you?—I had no idea that you were still with Lady Louisa."

"I have only been in one service ; I trust to be with Lady Louisa for many more years yet—when I leave her service I shall never enter another. Her ladyship is waiting for you upstairs."

Parker's words and manner, and appearance, everything about her, were like another memory of the past. She belonged to the class of servant which is now extinct ; the class which used to think it an honour to serve one family practically from the cradle

to the grave. He was ushered up a narrow staircase to a room on the first floor which looked out on to the street. A woman was standing by a table to greet him as he entered. Somehow she went well with the room. It would not have been easy to say how old she was; she might have been thirty-five, or forty, or even more. One had only to look at her to realise that she was a gentlewoman of a type which is gone. Tall, slight, delicately formed, with wistful eyes, a tender mouth, soft brown hair, which was done in a style which made no attempt to conceal the fact that it was growing scanty. She was as unlike the general run of her out-of-door, up-to-date, cigarette-smoking, smart contemporaries as she could very well have been. One could not conceive of her, for instance, as driving a motor-car, with a bag of golf clubs on the seat at her side. Although not old—nowadays many women of her years are kittens—she so clearly belonged to the tradition which held that a woman's sphere was the home.

She was still for a moment when her visitor entered the room; then she held out both hands to him.

"Maurice!"

As he took her hands he had an absurd—an uncomfortable—feeling that she expected him to kiss her. In his desire to ignore the idea that any such notion could have filled her mind he was more than ordinarily bluff. There was no hint of sentiment in either his voice or manner.

"Why, Louisa, you're looking uncommonly well!"

He felt her hands shiver. As she withdrew them she seemed to grow a trifle rigid, as if something had

stiffened her. He was aware that she had expected from him another sort of greeting.

"You—you seem taller than ever."

"Don't say that, please. I was always monstrous; don't say I've grown more monstrous still."

"I never thought you monstrous—never. To me you were always just as a man ought to be." She paused. He wished she would not talk like that; but he could find nothing to say. She went on. "Do you mind my sitting?" Both she and her voice were trembling.

"My dear Louisa!" He laughed, or tried to. "What a question to ask?"

"Your—your appearance has agitated me more even than I—feared. Do you know, Maurice, that I wanted to put on mourning for you? When time went on, and there were no news of you, I felt sure that you could not be still living."

"As a matter of fact I was only just alive."

"I did not think that if you were alive you—you could be so cruel as not to send me an occasional message. Forgive my saying 'cruel,' but it was—cruel. You do not know what I have suffered—waiting."

As he listened and looked he felt a sudden strange sensation; something which almost amounted to a touch of shame. For an instant he was at a loss for words; then they came with a rush.

"Believe me, Louisa, that the cause of my silence was egregiously simple. It was all I could do to keep my head above water, that was the reason why you heard nothing; my whole time was occupied in doing that. Then, of course, I knew what you believed of me."

"Maurice!—what do you mean by that? What did I believe?"

"You believed that I had forged those—those papers."

"Never!" The lady seemed all at once to bristle with indignation. "Never for an instant did I believe that, Maurice. It hurts me that you could have thought it possible that I should be guilty of —of such treachery. It seems so strange that you should have gone away, without a word of explanation, so that we none of us could find you."

"I thought you would understand; my wish was that you should think me guilty."

"How could you do that, when it was clear all along that it was Eustace who had done it?"

"How was that? He was the head of the family? My wish was to cover him. It did not matter what became of me; it mattered everything what became of him. At best you cannot have been sure of his guilt, you can only have suspected."

"But he confessed—he had to. Matters reached such a point that it was only by telling the truth that he could save himself from arrest."

"And what has become of him?"

"I don't know. I can't say if anyone knows, but I don't. I believe he has changed his name——"

"He has changed his name!"

"So I have been given to understand. I suppose he had made his own name too notorious. No doubt, if you wish, you will be able to learn all particulars from the lawyers, who have the whole conduct of the affairs of the family in their hands. From what I gathered, he is living somewhere abroad, on such income as the lawyers are able to

send him—which certainly can't be much. I learned, by a side wind, some little while ago, that straitened though his circumstances were, his manner of living has not improved, although he was seriously ill—almost dying, my informant alleged."

The visitor had crossed to the window and was looking out into the street. Now he turned to the lady.

"Louisa, what fools we wise men are! To think that I should have endured what I have for nothing at all. In my worst times it has been a sort of grim comfort to me that I was in a sense a martyr; that I was sacrificing myself for the sake of others. And all the while I was only a purblind idiot. It is really rather funny. Suffer me to ask you a question, Louisa. You say that Staines is existing on such income as is derived—I presume—from the estate. In that case, on what are you living? It's a blunt question, but I hope you'll forgive it."

"For the first five years I endured much privation, Maurice. I tried to pretend to myself that I was earning my own living—no matter what at. In any case it was only pretence. For five years Parker earned my living—that's the candid truth. What I should have done without her I dare not think. When it came to be a case of my earning money I proved to be an absolutely helpless creature. Five years ago, Aunt Caroline died. She left me, quite unexpectedly, nine thousand pounds; on the income derived from that legacy Parker and I are living."

"You are wonderful women, both of you; I

don't know which is the more wonderful, Parker or you."

"Parker, beyond the shadow of a doubt. In an emergency, when both our pockets were empty, she counted, I didn't. That's the truth. She taught me a lesson which I shall never forget."

"I should imagine I have taught you a lesson, too, Louisa. Have you forgotten that it was the family which I represent who brought you to the plight in which Parker counted; that it was we who robbed you of every penny you possessed?"

"My dear Maurice, what is the use of talking of what is past and gone for ever? Nor do I like the way in which you express yourself. I cannot admit that 'robbed' is a word which you ought to use. I have always regarded myself as one of the family; when the rest of you suffered, I suffered also, and I was content to suffer."

"To the extent of how many thousand pounds? But I was not content that you should suffer. Since the moment when I saw you last, Louisa, it has been my constant hope that there might come a time when I should be in a position to return what we—had lost for you. That day has come." He placed various documents on the table in front of her. "That paper is a banker's receipt for the sum named on the face, which has been paid in to your account; there is a pass-book crediting you with the amount; there is a cheque-book. You will find yourself the possessor of fifty thousand pounds, which, roughly estimated, is the amount you lost to us with the accruing interest. I cannot tell you what a relief it is to me to be able at last to right in some measure the wrong which we once did you."

The speaker stopped. There was silence in the room. The lady seemed as if she were hurt rather than pleased. She looked askance at the papers which lay in front of her; picking up with her thin fingers the banker's receipt, eyeing it as if it were something undesirable. She laid it down; sat for some seconds with her eyes fixed on the tablecloth; then looked up at her visitor.

"I am sorry, Maurice, that you should have thought it necessary to do this. Fifty thousand pounds is much more than I ever had; you are proposing to make me a gift of—I don't know how much money. I don't like it. When I had your letter—I had other hopes. I did not imagine that you only wanted to see me about money. There were so many other things I wished to see you about. I would rather you took those things away." She motioned towards the papers. "I have all that I need, thank you; Aunt Caroline saw to that. My wants are very simple—so are Parker's."

The gentleman stood eyeing her with a smile which was not a gay one.

"Louisa, you are unchanged."

She looked up at him. "I hope, Maurice, that I can say the same of you."

"You can't. No man could remain unchanged who has seen what I have; thank goodness for it. You were always the most unpractical of persons, you are unpractical still. This is not a question which I can discuss with you; it's just plain honesty; even if you were a member of my family, my cousin, or even my sister, it would make no difference. You had money—we lost it; no matter how we lost it, we did; it is only rudimentary

common sense that we should return it to you when the opportunity offered."

"But I never had fifty thousand pounds."

"You have been without the use of your money, and therefore the interest, for many years; don't you understand that when a man borrows money for a long period, when he does return it to the principal he has to add interest? However, as I said, that's not a matter for discussion. There is your money, Louisa—it is yours. Your refusing to regard it as yours won't make it mine; and there's an end."

"You must answer me one question, Maurice: Can you spare all this?"

"I can, and not feel the loss. I'm a rich man."

"You must be a very rich man if fifty thousand pounds is as nothing to you." Sighing, she brushed the papers to one side. "Well, let's leave money alone; I daresay Parker will be very glad to know I have it. Let us talk, Maurice, about other and more interesting things. To begin with—I have never had an opportunity of returning you this."

There was a tiny leather case beside her. Opening it, she took out a ring, which she proffered to her visitor. He stared at it as if confused.

"But, my dear Louisa, what is that?"

He found her answer a little startling.

"It is my engagement ring; don't you remember the half-hoop diamond ring which you gave me when we were engaged to be married? I have kept on wearing it ever since; I only took it off the other day when I had your note. But now, of course, I must give it back to you."

He was speechless. He had a dreadful feeling that, in spite of the quiet tone in which she spoke,

her heart, as it were, was standing still; that while to him the moment meant less than nothing, in it, to her, was compressed—in a sense—the whole of her life. She had always cared for him much more than he had cared for her—he had known it, she had not. To her an engagement was a sacred thing—especially an engagement based on sentiment—as she had supposed hers had been. She had waited, with the quiet patience of which some women are capable, for this meeting. She had talked of wearing mourning; yet he had no doubt that all the while, at the back of her mind, she had hoped that he still lived; that hope had become fact, and now she looked for her reward. She trusted—with what depths of longing he dared not guess—that he would not only refuse to take back the ring which, as she confessed, she had worn since she saw him last, but that in refusing he would take her in his arms and restore the ring to what she deemed to be its proper, perhaps its sacred, place upon her finger.

He would rather have committed hari-kiri than have done any such thing. It was, of course, absolutely and altogether out of the question.

So, with a difficulty which he trusted was not apparent, he treated the matter as if it were the merest commonplace. He took the ring she offered—her hand dropped as he did so—and examined it.

"I tell you what we'll do, Louisa. This ring is a bit old-fashioned—we'll take it to a man I know in Piccadilly, and we'll have it overhauled; then you could wear it as a dress ring, couldn't you? What do you say?"

She said nothing; but the expression on her face was eloquent, and when he saw it he was also still.

CHAPTER XXVI.

WHAT MR. FOSTER FOUND.

MARTIN ADAIR, in his sitting-room at the hotel, was staring at a telegram which he had found awaiting his return upon a table, when a message was brought that Mr. Foster was waiting to see him below. He looked at the waiter with lack-lustre eyes.

"Mr. Foster!" He seemed to be making an effort at recollection. "Oh, yes, of course. Show Mr. Foster in."

The instant the waiter had gone, he returned to the study of his telegram; its purport seemed to be beyond his understanding. He read it again and again; then, with knitted brows, seemed to wrestle within himself for its meaning.

"If this is true, then my whole life is changed."

That is what he was saying to himself when the lawyer came into the room.

"You have come in the very nick of time," he told him. "I find myself all at once in a pretty tight place. You might perhaps be able to help me—if one man ever can help another. I've got great news, Foster."

"I also bring what you may consider to be—in a sense—an interesting piece of news. You remember the sealed package which Jerningham Creed committed to my keeping on the understanding that if it were still in my charge when he died, I was to open it within twenty-four hours of his decease? In the package was a despatch-box, and in the despatch-box his will. You have it in your recollection?"

"Am I likely to have forgotten it? Of course I have."

"Here is the despatch-box. When I handed over the will to the usual authorities I retained the box. It stood upon a shelf. This morning, not an hour ago, I accidentally knocked it off. It fell to the floor. As it fell I heard a curious sound come from within. I said to myself: 'There's something broken.' I looked inside; nothing was broken; but the force of the fall had loosened the spring. The woodwork at the bottom of the box had come away and disclosed the fact that it was a false bottom, and that there was a cavity beneath. The action of the spring had caused the noise I heard. In the false bottom was an envelope; here it is. I, of course, have no notion of what it contains, but as the contents may be important, I brought it myself as soon as I could."

He had produced the despatch-box from a bag he carried, had opened it, pressed a spring—the apparent bottom had come away—and there beneath was an envelope which the lawyer handed to his client.

"You will observe the inscription."

Across the envelope was written, in small, shaky characters, suggesting the writing of an old man:

"To M. A.—To be opened only by him, and to be read when he is alone—if this envelope is ever found."

"That's rather an odd inscription; the last words almost suggest what we call a bull; the envelope could hardly be opened by any one if it was never found. I will leave it with you, and the despatch-box also; you may find it contains other secret places."

Mr. Foster closed his bag, picked up his hat, and made as if he were going. Mr. Adair checked him; he held the envelope, and the telegram was in front of him on the table.

"One moment, Foster, if you please. It would be quite in keeping with Creed's ideas of humour if this envelope contained something in the shape of a codicil, altering the whole of his testamentary dispositions."

"It is scarcely likely to do that, or he would hardly suggest that you should open it only when alone. If his intention was to alter his will, he would surely not wish to confine the knowledge of that fact to you alone."

"I see your point. His will left me everything. If this envelope contains a codicil which leaves me nothing, I am hardly likely to publish the fact to the whole world. I follow you, Foster."

He paused as if to consider something which he had in his mind; then presently continued:

"I have a telegram here, Foster, which contains what to me is some very vital news. My intention was to let you see it, and to ask your advice on certain points which it raises. But this envelope which you have unearthed rather alters the situation; knowing what I do of Mr. Creed's character,

I think I had better make myself master of its contents before I commit myself in any direction whatever. I never knew why he made me his heir; he may have done it acting on a whim of the moment, as a sort of joke. I have a strong feeling, in spite, Foster, of the point which you suggested, that this envelope contains something which bears upon his will. I shouldn't be a bit surprised if with one hand he takes away what he gave with the other. That would be rather a facer, considering how far matters have gone."

"I prefer to contemplate no such probability."

"We'll hope you are right—I'm sure I do. Anyhow, before I talk about this telegram, I'll see what's in the envelope. I'm to read it when I'm alone, so I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to go; or you might take a chair in here, and I might go into the bedroom and read it there."

"I don't think I should do that. You read it after I've gone. If it contains anything important, you can communicate with me at your leisure. I'm not at all sure, mind you, considering the circumstances in which it has come into your possession, that you are bound to communicate the contents to anyone, no matter what they are."

"That's a very insidious speech, Foster. Do you mean to say that if this envelope contains something which disinherits me, I'm entitled to keep the knowledge to myself, or even to put the envelope and its contents into the fire?"

"I don't go so far as that—not at all. But I do say that if Creed wished to have the contents of that envelope made public, he ought not to have hidden it where only an accident revealed its presence. One

parting word of advice, Adair. Whatever the envelope contains, don't be in a hurry. It has lain hidden in the box all this time; it might have remained there for an indefinite number of years. You digest its contents well, and consider them from all possible points of view before you breathe a word of what they are to anyone. As I say, do nothing in a hurry."

When the lawyer had gone, Martin Adair stood eyeing the envelope.

"This is a pleasant position. Foster suggests more than he says; he rather surprises me. If in this envelope there is an intimation—as, in spite of Foster, there very possibly is—that old Creed has been playing the fool with me all through, so that I'm as penniless as when I first made his acquaintance, that will make that telegram still more curious. Anyhow, it's no good shilly-shallying. Let's see what's in the thing."

He tore the envelope open.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE DEAD MAN SPEAKS.

"MY Well-Beloved Cousin and Heir,—That I should leave you all I have in the world will probably seem to you such a merry jest that it were perhaps a pity to spoil the full flavour of its humour by explaining that it is not, perhaps, so funny as it seems. Yesterday I made you my heir; to-day—or rather to-night; or is it this morning, because midnight is past?—I'm going to tell you why, so far as it may be told. Since a man's reasons are not always plain to himself, they are likely, now and then, to be even less clear to others; though sometimes it is the other way about, because there are occasions on which the lookers-on see most of the game; though I doubt if this is such a case; I doubt it very much indeed; I doubt if, where I have been concerned, a looker-on has ever seen most of the game."

Such was the first paragraph on the several sheets of blue paper which Mr. Adair had taken out of the envelope. There were several sheets and they were all closely covered with the minute, wavering

characters which seemed to be so suggestive of a pen held in an old man's hand.

"At least," the reader told himself, "that doesn't sound as if this were in any way a revocation of his will as I know it. But why does he address me as 'cousin'? Was he humorous to the last, in his own queer vein?"

The explanation came presently. He read on:

"It is by way of being a coincidence that you and I should both be masquerading under assumed names; because, of course, your name is no more Martin Adair than mine is Jerningham Creed, though I have been Jerningham Creed so long that I doubt if there is a living creature who knows that I was ever anyone else. I knew you were not Martin Adair directly I got a good view of your face under the electric standard on the Embankment. That was why I brought you home; that is why I have made you my heir; so the jest has fizzled out.

"I was born Jocelyn Culver; that is a name which, perhaps, you have heard before. Your father was my first cousin, so you are my first cousin once removed. He was Eustace, Marquis of Staines, and you are Maurice Ashurst. Do not suppose for an instant that I ever believed you to be Martin Adair. You are your father's son, every inch of you; though he was a thief, and I think it just possible that you are an honest man.

"You know all about me, I take it, since I have told you that I am Jocelyn Culver. Your grandfather's younger sister married my father, and your relations disowned her because she did. So you may believe that I was not taught to love you. I went to Eton with your father; there I grew to

hate him. His standards of honour were his own, even in those days; he jockeyed me at every turn. It is one of my pleasantest recollections that I fought him on the Sixpenny for two solid hours—and I broke his nose. He had it set, but it was never quite straight afterwards. The mischief was that the little crook in it improved his personal appearance—and he always was good-looking, as you are, and as I never have been. But in those days physically I was nearly your father's match, as I showed him on Sixpenny. When I was a colleger, Sixpenny was the Eton battle-ground. It was the grassy arena on which we boys fought all our fights. And good ones some of them were—and fought, as a rule, to a finish.

"Once I put your father's nose out of joint; he put mine out for ever after we had left. He married the girl who was engaged to me. Her name was Eleanor Montgomery. Her people and mine were neighbours. We had been girl and boy together. When we reached the age at which people talk about such things, I told her that I loved her, and she admitted that she loved me. We were betrothed—with the approval of the relatives on both sides. The date of the marriage was actually fixed, when she met your father on Newmarket Heath. He had some slight acquaintance with the people with whom she was staying; by them he was introduced to her—at his request. He had a horse which won a race—I do not know what—it was his hour of success. He laid siege to her; he went home with her friends, and dined with them, and stayed the night. He hung to her skirts for days; in a week he had won her. When I was expecting her to come home to

make the final arrangements for our wedding, there came a note from her instead, in which she informed me, with many tears, and blushes, and sighs, and I daresay groans, that she had run away with your esteemed parent, and that they were already man and wife.

"I was one man when I began to read her note; I was another when I had finished. If they had been within reach I should have done my best to kill the pair of them. I resolved to challenge him—they still fought duels, though they were few and far between. While I was still considering to whom I should entrust my challenge, misfortune overtook me in a new form. My father had some new tandem horses. He took my mother out in a dog-cart to show them off. The leader shied, the wheeler got out of hand; the dog-cart was overturned, while going some fourteen or fifteen miles an hour. The groom at the back, jumping out, escaped with his life; my father and mother were pitched upon their heads and killed on the spot. So I lost wife and parents within a few days. I could hardly challenge your father before I had buried mine; afterwards I did not want to—I had thought of another way.

"I had come across a man who had made a fortune by lending money—a usurer. I heard tales about him which, in the state of mind in which I then was, amused me vastly,—how he had ruined whole families; stripping them of everything they had; leaving them even without rags to cover their bare bones. He had had transactions with your father; if he chose he might make things awkward for him.

"The knowledge that this was so, gave me an

idea. I wanted to be even with your father somehow—I did not much care how—and with the woman he had married. If I fought a duel with him he might win—I should not get even with him that way. But I saw a way in which I might get more than even.

"My father, and my mother also—I was their only child—had left me all they had, which meant that I was well provided for. I sold the house in which I was born, and the furniture—which was much older than I was—and the land over which I had wandered since I first could toddle. Altogether, I had quite a large capital. With this I commenced business—as a usurer. I dropped my own name, cut all my acquaintances, took chambers in the Temple, and there began to spin my webs.

"You will say, perhaps, that I was mad; that there was a flaw somewhere in my mental equipment. I had to do something—what could I do? Marriage was out of the question. I would never give another woman the chance to treat me as your father's wife had done. The home in which I had passed my life so far had grown dreadful in my eyes. All the countryside knew my story. I knew perfectly well what everyone said of me—that I was the man whom the girl had jilted. And they would enter into details of how she had jilted me—how she had thrown me over for another almost at the foot of the altar. I provided conversation for numbers of people who were glad of something they could talk about. I was a topic of which they never tired. It was obvious that I could not stay at home. What could I do with myself, circumstanced as I was, if I went away? I might have gone, as some young men

do, to the devil; I might have drunk, and gambled, and added ruin to ruin. But I did not—I had no taste for that kind of thing. I was almost a teetotaler. I liked neither racing nor cards.

"Until your father married my wife I protest that I was a normal Englishman; he changed all that. The more I studied the question the more I was tickled by the idea of lending money to needy fools, or scamps, at usurious interest. It was the nearest modern equivalent to piracy, it was like taking out letters of marque; a usurer was a licensed—or perhaps unlicensed—freebooter. It was one's own fault if one did not keep out of reach of the law.

"So I established myself in chambers in Mitre Court as Jerningham Creed, and I flourished exceedingly. I soon learned that I had a head for business of that kind, and I managed things very well. Soon I was carrying on business in more than fifty towns, in each under a different name. I had half a dozen branches in London. Practically more than one firm of solicitors were employed in working solely for me. They gave me a commission out of the costs they expected from my clients, whom I instructed them to grind to powder. Before very long I was not only prospering as a usurer; in other directions I was doing better still. Quite candidly, my well-beloved cousin, I launched on a life of adventure.

"That also was an accident. One day a man came in who wanted to borrow five hundred pounds. When I asked him what security he had to offer, he took a case out of his pocket and showed me a diamond necklace. He said he had that to offer. I knew something of diamonds—I had lent money

on them before then. I knew quite well that that necklace was worth more than five hundred pounds, that if I could offer it in the open market I should probably get two thousand. So I looked at the man, and I looked at the necklace. I had the nucleus of a persuasive manner about me even in those days. In a few minutes the whole story was out. The necklace had belonged to the Countess of Stornoway; it had got mislaid on the Great Northern Railway, between Edinburgh and London. My visitor had found it. So I bought it for five hundred pounds.

"That was the first time I ever played the part of a receiver of stolen goods; the receiver who, they say, is worse than the thief. The part suited me; it had about it a flavour of adventure which mere usury lacked. Then it opened such a vista. I lent money to people all over Europe; suppose I bought stolen goods on the same scale, what thrilling moments I might have! Then, also, as I fingered the Countess of Stornoway's diamond necklace, I realised, not for the first time, that if any capacity to love was left still to me, it was the capacity to love what men call precious stones. It is good to dip your hands and, as it were, bathe them in a heap of gold. I liked to take up handfuls of sovereigns. But diamonds, pearls, rubies, emeralds, the glowing beauties snatched from earth's most sacred places —compared to gold they were as the sun to the moon. Fancy washing your hands in them! I decided there was nothing I should like better than to be the possessor of sacks full of precious stones. So I set about getting them.

"I am not providing you with a treatise on abstract

morality. I am not so much immoral as non-moral. In my code of ethics morality doesn't count. If I choose to buy what A stole from B, I buy it; and there's an end. Unless the policeman intervenes —and then the end takes a different form. But no policeman ever has intervened with me. No doubt I have been lucky; but I fancy it has not been so much a question of luck as of caution. Soon after I began my second line of business the chambers below mine became vacant. I took them, in the name of Latraille and Olgano. They became the offices of Messrs. Latraille, Olgano, and Company. They were the principal buyers of a certain sort of goods. Nothing was ever bought unless it was clearly shown how the seller became possessed of what he had to offer. I have kept minute records of each and every transaction; you will perhaps have found them before you read this. There are other little contrivances of mine on which you may also have stumbled.

"I have, at the present time of writing, what I believe to be one of the finest, if not the finest, collections of precious stones in the world, which is in one man's hands. I have not kept all I have bought, for various reasons. I have found excellent markets for, I suppose, one-third of my purchases. The whole thing has been a first-rate speculation; the profits most satisfactory, quite apart from the fact that I have such a desirable stock-in-trade. I will call it stock-in-trade, though I have so managed matters that it has practically cost me nothing. It is worth—I wonder if you will ever find out how much it is worth? Stated in round figures, such an appetising sum of money! And then the fun I've

had! I dare say the buccaneers of the Spanish main knew stirring times; I doubt if they were more stirring than some of those which I have known; yes, and I am writing in the days when all that kind of thing is supposed to be as extinct as the dodo. No romance in life nowadays, no spirit of adventure—that is what the pundits say. I think of their wise saws; then I open one of my cases and play with the contents, and I laugh.

"You must not laugh; you must be serious.

"I have flourished as the righteous flourish, since I have put righteousness behind me—and I have ruined you and yours. That has been one of the greatest of my successes. Everything which your family had is, I believe, at present mine—even to the family honour. I have that in a little box. I broke your father; your father broke his first wife's heart, so that she died, and he married a second and begat you; and now I have broken you, and your mother, and your half-brother—and you're all down in the dirt together: a dishonoured, starveling crew!

"You've even robbed the woman who was to be your wife—you, my well-beloved heir. I lent the money for which your brother forged. I will not deny, if you press me, that the idea of employing that means of getting money was put into his head by me. Your father died a miserable, shamefaced old rag, and I am still living. I think I can cry quits with him now. He did me out of my wife, to whom, after a while, he became heartily welcome—she wore so badly. I have done him out of a good deal more than a wife—I have done the lot of you. That is some time ago. I had put you all out of my head,

and then I met you on the Embankment. That was rather a curious meeting.

"I had been to a certain place where I do business, which I only think it advisable to visit at night. Returning, at the usual matutinal hour, I met you. The incidents which marked our meeting are probably fresh in your memory—they are in mine. The gentlemen who attacked me under the shadow of Waterloo Bridge were, I fancy, clients of a former time. I have had several little experiences of the kind. Clients become dissatisfied. Deeming discretion to be the better part of valour, they keep in the background; but they commission their friends to take it out of me. That, I imagine, was the explanation of that little incident. They might have murdered me. You came along, and they did not—you nearly murdered them instead. It did me good to see the way you laid about you. And then, when I got a good sight of your face, and knew you to be Maurice Ashurst—you may smile, but the discovery kept me up all night, thinking.

"So you became a clerk in my office. Six-foot-four, with clothes appertaining to five-foot-ten—second-hand clothes at that. You were a figure of fun—you have been a figure of fun all the months I have had you in my employ. I admit that I never imagined you would stop—or I doubt if I would ever have had you. You were an Ashurst; the Ashursts are a tainted lot; I took it for granted that you were like the rest of your breed. If, before long—on thirty shillings a week, with stoppages which made it twenty—you did not openly kick over the traces, you would probably endeavour to supply the deficiency in your income by methods which would

give me a grip on you. I was always on the look-out for petty pilfering. You remember how I have sometimes left a lot of loose cash about; I thought that you might take a shilling here or a shilling there; if you had gone as high as a sovereign it would have been all the better—I should have had you anyhow. But you never did. I will be quite candid: I believe you to be at once the first and the only honest Ashurst I have ever heard of. You are honest to the point of quixotism. I have tested you in divers ways of which you have never dreamed; I have hoped that somehow I should find you wanting—but I never have. I have come to the conclusion that you have a standard of your own, and that you could not depart from it if you tried.

"In short, my well-beloved heir, I came to the conclusion that you were that most amazing of all fools, a gentleman and a man of honour.

"The discovery put another idea into my head. I could not get the better of you in one way, I might in another. Suppose I were to make you my heir? That would put you in a pretty hole. You would soon find out that, to put it in the most modest form, a good many of my possessions were ill-gotten. I pictured to myself what you would look like when you discovered that beyond all possibility of doubt you were the nominal owner of a large amount of stolen property. Unless I err, the first thing you would do would be to restore it to its owners.

"That would be a pretty business. Your inheritance would be to you like the mediæval hair-shirt, an occasion of much inconvenience. Quite possibly you would find yourself involved with the police, not only of this great country, but of others. You

would have a parlous time. There would be my clients as well. More than once they have nearly had my life. You being of a more aggressive nature, they would almost certainly have yours. I have suffered much at their hands; please the Fates, you would suffer more. If things should go as I expect, they should make your life a misery.

"So I have made you my heir. That is the last link in the chain of vengeance which, in this case, has reached beyond the grave. You have known despair because of me; now you shall know the prickings of a vigorous conscience; you shall suffer remorse, and the resultant penalties—for what I have done. It is a great idea. I ask myself if, when you read this, you will think so. Were power given to the dead to have glimpses of the living, how I should like to stand behind you while you are reading, and then lean over your shoulder and stare into your face when you have done. Would it be the face of a haunted man—the face of a man whose conscience goads him as with the whip of the avenging furies?

"Good-bye, my well-beloved heir. I have made you my heir because I do not love you—so I call you well-beloved. You are my cousin once removed. I may outlive you. The physician who examines for an insurance company told me only the other day that physically I am as sound as a bell. I may see you under the sod—dropped into a pauper's grave. So may it be! In that case you will not read this; I shall have it back again. I hope I may derive as much amusement from the re-reading as I have from the writing. If you shall outlive me—you are the younger man, and on the face of it you should—

then I wish you well. I trust you may derive all the benefits from your inheritance that I anticipate, and that, through you, I may once more be even with your father.

"I am, in conclusion I would say it, my dear Maurice, your tender-hearted, if far-seeing, cousin,

"JOCELYN CULVER."

"P.S.—A woman's. If you get all the good I wish you you will do well; within a month of my being dead, shall I say I hope that you will not be a convicted felon?"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WHAT WAS IN THE TELEGRAM.

MARTIN ADAIR—the present writer will call him that to the end—having read what was written on the blue paper to the very last word, sat and thought: those blue papers contained matter of which he would probably still be thinking when he was an older man. He pictured Jerningham Creed in that dirty sitting-room of his, which was a veritable treasure-house, in spite of all its filth, sitting at the untidy table, alone, in some silent watch of the night, his head bent close to the sheet as was his wont when he wrote, penning word after word and line after line of that frank revelation of the manner of man he really was. And as he dwelt upon the picture presented to his brain Martin Adair began to understand.

"I wish," he said to himself, "that he was standing behind me, and could lean over my shoulder and look into my face. I wonder what his feelings would be when his eyes met mine—knowing that I had just read this. To think that he should have made me his heir for such a reason! He was a fellow of infinite jest, my cousin Jocelyn."

While Adair sat with the blue papers still upon his knee, John Harper came into the room.

"I have arranged with Outerbridge," he said, speaking without any sort of preamble. "You're to hand over to him, in the presence of his friends, the twenty thousand pounds, and you're to treat them to a little entertainment. He on his side guarantees that his friends thenceforward will cease to favour you with their attentions. You'll be able to walk abroad, in other words, without fearing that your naturally fine features may be further damaged."

"That's good. I shall be glad to be rid of Messrs. Outerbridge and Co. As for the others——" The speaker paused.

"There are others? How many? You can't say? That's cheery. Can't you manage to wipe them off *en bloc* and clean the slate?"

"I daresay: I have no fear."

"You never had any fear; that's not the point. They may lay you out, although you have no fear. It's not fair to the future Mrs. Adair—or, rather, Lady Ashurst—that you should continue to run a risk which can by any possibility be avoided. She fears for you if you don't for yourself or for her."

"Harper, I'll make friends with all the world, on my honour, as far as is in my power. A man who takes unto himself a wife gives enough hostages to fortune without burdening himself with the necessity of having to consider who may be waiting for him round the corner—if the burden may be avoided. And I think in my case it may. I'll make it my especial business that no one shall have a grudge against me. By the way, you spoke just now of the future Lady Ashurst. I've just had that."

He gave Mr. Harper the telegram, which all this

while had lain open upon the table. Harper read it through, then broke into exclamation.

"Great Scott, man! What does this mean?"

"It means that my wife who is to be will not be Lady Maurice Ashurst—she'll be the Marchioness of Staines. My brother is dead, so the lawyers say—that is, if that telegram really comes from them, which I think we may take for granted."

"And you are the next heir?"

"I'm not only the next, but I'm the only heir. I believe that, practically, I'm the last Ashurst living. There may be some members of a remote cadet branch somewhere, but they are unknown to me. I'm the only real Ashurst. And I'm like a man who confronts a company of dreadful ghosts, the ghosts of my sires. They were all pretty dreadful people living, and I don't fancy they're much better dead. We've been a rotten lot—the family I represent. Let's hope I'm what the doctors call a 'sport,' not in the least like the stock from whom I've sprung. If I could I'd drop the name—I'd continue to be Martin Adair. But I believe the law won't let me. I have to be the Marquis of Staines, whether I will or no. Offer up a prayer, Harper, that the last Marquis of Staines may be better than any of his predecessors."

"I've not the slightest doubt that he will—not that I believe for a moment, knowing what I do of the position of affairs, that you are likely to be the last Marquis of Staines. Is anything settled about when the wedding is to be?"

Even as he asked the question the girl came into the room, without there being any announcement of her coming. She had reached that stage when she came and went just as the fancy took her.

"Here's a lady," said Mr. Adair, "who can answer that question much better than I can. Winnie, here's Harper wants to know if there's anything settled about the date when the wedding is to be."

She looked at him and smiled—as she had not used to smile.

"I've been talking it over with Ella," she said.

"That's something. And what did Ella say? I should like to know what some one said, and so would Harper."

"Ella thinks that it would perhaps be better if we didn't have a big wedding."

"That's nice of Ella—especially as I think what Ella thinks."

The girl, quite unconscious of what they were, was fingering the blue papers which had come out of the envelope. She looked down.

"How long would it take to get a special licence?"

"About ten minutes, or less. Put it at the outside, a quarter of an hour."

"And how soon could we be married after you had got the licence?"

"So far as I understand the procedure, you only have to take it to the church, and say to the parson, 'Here's the licence, and here's my wife that is to be,' and he marries you. So it comes to this—when you have the licence you can be married as soon as you can find a parson and a church."

Then she looked up at him.

"Settle with those men; tell me that I need no longer lie awake at night fearing that harm may come to you from anyone; assure me that you have done your best to make your peace with all who

wish you ill; so soon as you can do that you may get the marriage licence."

"I'll get the licence," he told her, "within a week."

She turned to John Harper. "You will see," she said, "that he makes peace with all his enemies."

"I will that; he shall turn them into friends—such of them, that is, as are worth turning. I'll make it my special business to see that you shall have no cause on that account to lie awake at night."

"Thank you; I trust you—both." She picked up the blue papers she had been fingering. "What are these?" she asked.

Adair answered: "That's a voice from the grave. That's Jerningham Creed's apology for his life, wherein he sets forth the reason he lived as he did—and why he chose me as his heir. It makes very curious reading. I commend it to your attention, Winnie, and to yours, Harper. It's by way of being a literary composition which, being once read, you'll neither of you be ever likely to forget. I know I never shall."

"Why did he make you his heir?"

"Because he hated me—that's a fact. He was a cousin of my father's—Creed was an alias like Adair. I remember hearing of him when I was a lad. The girl to whom he was engaged jilted him in favour of my father; my mother was my father's second wife; she was his first. Jocelyn Culver—that was old Creed's real name—I have been told, was always a curious fish; that paper shows it; the girl was well rid of him, though she behaved very badly, and so did my father. Thenceforward Culver made it one of the chief objects of his life to ruin them both

He transferred his spite to the second generation—meaning me. He knew me all the while, even when I was a starveling clerk in his office. He made me his heir because, as that paper sets forth, he thought it was the greatest injury he could do me. He was mistaken. He did me no injury; he could have conferred on me no greater benefit. This bids fair to be a red-letter day to me, Winnie. I see myself well within the reach of a wife; I have resolved the problem which has puzzled me—why Jerningham Creed made me his heir; and I learn that my wife, when I get her, will be the Marchioness of Staines. This telegram I not long ago received from the firm who have been our family lawyers, I believe, for generations. You will see that they tell me that my brother Eustace, who was the Marquis, died last week at Aix-les-Bains. That means that I succeed—and that you will be the Marchioness."

The girl regarded him as if she were not sure if he was in jest or earnest; then she read the telegram, then looked back at him with streaming eyes. Something for a moment seemed to prevent her speaking; when she did speak her voice was trembling.

"I am not fit," she said.

Martin Adair moved towards her as John Harper went out of the room.

CHAPTER XXIX.

TAKEN FROM THE LIFE.

IT was a singular assemblage.

The room was large; a long table ran down the centre—the company had been dining. It would have been interesting to learn what some members of the company thought about the meal which had been set before them. At the head of the table was Martin Adair; on his right was Miss Dennis; on his left Mrs. Bishop Guy. John Harper was at the foot; he had no lady either on his right or left—the rest of the company was masculine. Curious personalities some of the diners had.

Maximilian Outerbridge sat next to Miss Dennis; next to Mrs. Bishop Guy was a big, burly, dark-faced man with a big nose and thick lips, Aaron Lowenstein, of Amsterdam, a famous dealer in diamonds, one of the committee brought together by John Harper to what he called "arbitrate" on the question of the "loot" from the Winter Palace at Pekin. This assembly was gathered together for the purpose of carrying out that committee's award. There were Chinamen there—six or seven of them—half a dozen other men who were perhaps Malays or Lascars, or, at any rate, inhabitants of the Far

East—all of them persons who were obviously of humble stations in life. An unprepossessing-looking lot they were. When she saw them, Mrs. Bishop Guy had whispered to Miss Dennis:

"Do you know, from their looks, it strikes me there's not one of those men who would hesitate to murder his mother for sixpence."

The lady put the figure rather low, but certainly their appearance did not inspire confidence.

The meal finished, Adair, standing up in his place at the head of the table, had explained the position. He had passed down the table two wooden boxes.

"Those, Mr. Outerbridge," he observed, "are for you. Each contains ten thousand sovereigns. They're pretty heavy—you noticed that each took two men to carry. In each box are five shelves divided into partitions containing a hundred sovereigns; there are two thousand sovereigns on each shelf, as I said, ten thousand on the five. You can count them now if you like, but they were counted not long ago in the presence of the gentlemen of the committee who are now here. They will assure you that the number is as I have said. Still, for your own satisfaction, and the satisfaction of your friends, would you like to count them?"

Outerbridge had raised the lids of the two boxes; he had lifted—with difficulty, strong man though he was—one of the trays; his eyes gleamed as they lighted on the neatly-arranged masses of yellow metal. His friends had risen from their chairs. As they leaned towards him, not only their eyes, but their whole countenances, shone. One felt that it would need very little to induce them to fall upon the boxes tooth and nail.

"That big, yellow man," remarked Mrs. Bishop Guy under her breath to her host, "will give a jump in a moment. When he gets his claws into the contents of that tray we shall see some fun."

"I don't think," replied the gentleman, speaking in the same tone of voice, "that we shall have what you call your 'fun' in here, though I daresay, when it comes to dividing the spoils, and Outerbridge is alone with his friends, he'll have all the fun he wants, and more; though that big, yellow hero of yours does look as if he would like to commence proceedings now."

The person alluded to was an enormous man, both as regards height and bulk; his nominal place was five seats from Outerbridge; now he was sprawling along the table so that he almost had his fingers in one of the boxes. Outerbridge shut down the lid with a snap; with what was clearly not an exclamation of pleasure the fellow withdrew his fingers only just in time to save them from being trapped. Outerbridge, speaking in some strange-sounding language, said something which caused not only the man, but also his friends, to glare at him. For some moments there was a babel of tongues; the dozen were speaking all together.

"If there's going to be trouble," suggested Mrs. Bishop Guy, "hadn't Winnie and I better go? We came here to dine, not to fight."

"There will be no fight. Their remarks only sound dreadful because you don't know what they're saying, and they will talk all together. A little patience; you'll find Outerbridge has them well in hand."

This was Adair.

Miss Dennis said: "I'm not going, even if they do fight. I stay here."

The babel died away. The excited yellow gentlemen resumed their seats; Outerbridge was apparently master of the situation. He addressed his host, his jovial face radiant with smiles.

"Speaking on behalf of my friends here, we'll take it that these two boxes contain the sum as stated. If there's more, when it comes to the counting, we'll probably hand it back to you; if there's a trifle less, no doubt you'll make it good. Fair dealing is all that we desire—everything open and above board. The treatment you mete out shall be meted to you again—you may take my word for that."

"Thank you, Outerbridge; that sounds almost scriptural. You won't mind giving me a receipt for the two boxes; and I trust I may take it for granted that the transaction is closed in a manner which is entirely satisfactory to you and your friends."

"Entirely. I think I am in a position to give you my personal assurance that henceforth my friends will be yours."

The presentation of the two boxes seemed to impress the majority of the diners with a feeling that the proceedings were at an end; evidently their one desire was to get away and divide the spoil. This desire to hurry off was checked by their host.

"One moment, gentlemen. Before you go I have prepared a little entertainment which I would like you to see. You have no doubt all of you heard of the cinematograph. I have here a film which I feel, and I am sure you will feel, ought to be shown on an occasion like this. Since I had it specially

developed for your amusement, I shall be obliged by your keeping your seats for the very few minutes which will be required to show it. I need not tell you that a cinematograph film can not be shown in a brilliant light like this; therefore, during the requisite few minutes, with your very kind permission, the lights will be lowered."

The lights were lowered—and the same instant a hubbub arose. Apparently the gentlemen from the East had not understood what Adair had said, or, if they had, had not appreciated its intention. When the room was plunged into comparative darkness, it would seem that they suspected they were about to be made the victims of some trick. Outerbridge's voice was heard above the din.

"Turn up the lights, man; we shall have trouble if you don't. We don't want to have any fooling with a cinematograph."

Adair replied in tones which were equally audible.

"I don't propose to treat you to any fooling, Outerbridge; you tell your friends to keep their eyes upon that screen."

Apparently a cinematograph apparatus had been established in a sort of cupboard which had been fitted up in one end of the room, at the back of the host. An aperture had been made in it not far from the ceiling, from which a ray of light streamed above the people's heads on to a sheet which had been stretched upon the opposite wall. Adair struck a bell; something happened to the sheet—something of which every creature in the room became instantly conscious. The voices of the Chinamen were stilled; comparative silence reigned. A picture appeared upon the sheet. Whether the Chinamen thought it

had come there by magic there was nothing to show; that the sight hushed their chatter was evident upon the face of things. One felt that all eyes were not only fixed upon the screen, but that they were riveted there.

The picture upon the screen represented a room—a room with which probably every person present was familiar—the room which Jerningham Creed had used as an office. Then one saw that one of the windows was raised. An arm came through; a head appeared above the sill; some one came through the window on to the floor—a man who stood with his back to the lens, so that at first his face was hidden. When presently he turned they saw that his was the face of a Chinaman.

He seemed to be disturbed in his mind, as if something were happening for which he was unprepared; was apparently in two minds whether to go or stay. He moved here and there about the room, with something futile in his gestures, as if uncertain what he really would be at.

A door at the corner opened, through which a figure appeared, the figure of an old man in his nightshirt. Every one who sat there staring recognised Jerningham Creed. Clearly he had just been roused from slumber and, tumbling out of bed, had come in hot haste to learn what had disturbed him. He stood for a moment in the doorway, then came quickly forward with an odd, jerky movement, as if he were cold, or old and stiff.

Obviously he saw the intruder; equally obviously the intruder saw him. The two men stood and eyed each other. Apparently Creed was about to ask a question when the other sprang towards him. He

took something from his jacket pocket—something which he carried in his hand ; something with which, without any sort of warning, he struck the old man on the head ; and the old man went down on to the floor, and there he stayed.

The intruder remained motionless on the spot where he had struck. He leaned over the recumbent figure ; then raised his head and listened, and looked again. The old man lay still. Dropping on to one knee, he turned the old man over, peered at his head, touched it with his fingers. Then he looked at what he had in his hand : those assembled round that dinner-table could see that it was wet with blood. Then he stood up straight and listened again. There began to appear at the open window another head. Before they could see to what manner of person it belonged, some one sprang at the screen at one end of the room, and at the cupboard at the other. The screen was torn from its place, and the lights were raised ; the whole place was full of hubbub.

"What's the matter with your friends ?" cried Adair. His voice was heard above all the din. "Don't they like the entertainment I have provided for their amusement ?"

Mr. Outerbridge gave no direct answer. He was issuing what seemed to be orders—speaking again in that foreign tongue. Four men seized each of the two wooden boxes. They bore them to the entrance, their friends about them on either side, and at their heels Outerbridge, as it were, acting as a convoy. No one offering them any hindrance, they passed out of the room—and Martin Adair's little entertainment was finished.

"What was the meaning of that picture?" asked a member of John Harper's committee of the host. "Was it a little joke you wished to play on them?"

Adair smiled. The girl had her hand upon his arm, as if she wished to be sure that he did nothing rash.

"It's a joke," he said, "which you perhaps will see again. I've an idea that the original film may become the property of Messieurs Plantin Frères, of Paris. They will perhaps call it 'Taken from the Life.'"

CHAPTER XXX.

TOWARDS OLD FAMILIAR PLACES.

THE film taken from life was shown, as Monsieur Roland had predicted, in practically every city, town, and hamlet in the world, with the implied approval of the English police; at least they made no attempt to stop it. So it came about that north, west, east, and south people were looking for the murderer of Jerningham Creed; yet they never found him. The figure with the Chinaman's face, and the sandbag in his hand, stood looking out from the screen at all sorts and conditions of people; but in the flesh not one of them ever saw him—*at any rate*, with any consciousness of recognition. None the less, as again Monsieur Roland had foreseen, no film ever tickled the public fancy as that one did; people flocked to see what, beyond the shadow of a doubt, was a genuine murder.

Martin Adair and Winifred Dennis were married, and they came out of the church the Marquis and Marchioness of Staines. John Harper was best man; Mr. Bishop Guy gave the bride away; there were no bridesmaids; even the newspapers did not know that a member of the peerage had been married.

A few days before the marriage Mr. Adair straightened matters with some one else. He handed a considerable sum of money to Gordon Ray, on the understanding that he would take himself out of the country, and that, in the event of his becoming a respectable citizen, say on the African veldt, after an interval during which proof would be given that it was his intention to run straight, he would receive a further sum, sufficient to establish him on the road of work which leads to honesty. Adair himself saw Charles Dennis off from a Liverpool wharf, bound for that land of promise in which so many men have tried to make a fresh start—the Dominion of Canada. The Marquis and Marchioness had rather an original notion for their honeymoon; they proposed to spend at least the first year of their married life in journeying round the world.

"I want to see," the lady said, "the places you saw when you were still wandering in the wilderness."

"You shall," the gentleman laughed. "We will re-visit together, under very different conditions from those in which I saw them first, those wide apart and widely scattered holes and corners and queer places [illegible], and look back, I feel absolutely certain that I was a man with nine lives."

THE END.

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